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“I’m Going to Help You Become a Better You”: Teacher-Student Dynamics in Special  
Education

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Sophie Sadovnikoff

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
1. Critical Disability Studies at the Scheffield School.....	2
2. What Special Education Looks Like – Past and Present.....	10
a. Interlude: A Day in the Life.....	23
3. Teaching Self-Control as Social Control.....	28
4. The Double-Edged Sword of Rapport.....	41
5. The Road to Independence Is Paved with Normalcy.....	54
6. In a Battle Between Care and Control, Who Really Wins?.....	70
References.....	76

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## Chapter 1: Critical Disability Studies at the Scheffield School

In a world of inequality, education has the opportunity to serve as “the great equalizer.” For people with disabilities, the stakes of the education system are high, as inequality limits their access to complete citizenship. 26.6% of people with disabilities live in poverty, a rate more than twice the national average (Erickson, Lee, and von Schrader 2017; U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Additionally, in 2017, only 29.3% of people with disabilities ages 16-64 were employed; for people without disabilities, this number is 73.5% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). These statistics on poverty and employment point to the barriers people with disabilities face to leading lives that meet basic measures of independence, not to mention ones that are fulfilling and freely guided by their will. Special education, or the education of people with disabilities, has the opportunity to work against some of the barriers to citizenship that people with disabilities face.

This study explores teachers’ roles in special education in terms of how they interact with students with disabilities. Teachers have the opportunity to empower students, to teach them skills to aid them in combatting marginalization, and to act as advocates for their students. Teachers also, however, have the power to perpetuate and reinforce normative systems of oppression that reproduce inequalities. In the struggle against oppression and disempowerment, teachers can play a crucial role in employing education as the great equalizer, or else not. This happens at the everyday level, in interactions with students, as well as at the organizational level, in the school’s goals and expectations for their students. The question this research seeks to answer, then, is: how do special education teachers interact with their students with disabilities, and how does this teacher role fit within a society that seeks to marginalize these students?

To answer this question, I turn to the framework of critical disability studies. Critical disability studies argues that we exist in an ableist society, one in which disability is

socially constructed as deviant because it does not align with a constructed idea of “normal.” As Davis (2017:2) explains, “the ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person.” The association of people with disabilities as in need of correction is tied to the history of eugenics, which seeks to frame disabilities as deleterious aberrations to the human race (Davis 2017). Susman (1994:16) argues that “it is not the functional limitations of [disability] which constitute the greatest problems faced by disabled individuals, but rather societal and social responses to it.” These scholars argue that negative social responses to disability create problems for individuals with disabilities. Critical disability studies asserts that disability is not something to be eradicated; rather, disability as a negative form of difference is socially constructed and disability can instead be understood as an aspect of human diversity (Davis 2017). Special education teachers operate within this context, and their actions can thus be analyzed using these concepts of normalcy and deviance. I supplement this theoretical framework with the work of scholars such as Goffman and Foucault, who argue that such norms inform social control and discipline.

I argue that the experiences of special education teachers show that they are social actors within an ableist society. As such, they reproduce ableism by disciplining, normalizing, and controlling their students. What complicates this analysis, though, is the moral framework that teachers are operating from. Teachers express a deep sense of caring for and about their students, and understand their work as being their best effort at helping their students to be accepted by, and thus find success within, the broader society. The ableist actions that they perform are, ironically, an effort to help their students create fulfilling lives within an ableist society. While critical disability studies assumes that all people who seek to normalize individuals with disabilities see disability as a kind of deviance that requires elimination, these tensions between

control and care force us to question these underlying moral assumptions of critical disability studies by demonstrating how special education teachers can seek to normalize their students out of a profound care for them and their well-being.

## RESEARCH SITE

I conducted my research at the summer program of a private, self-contained special education school, which I refer to by the pseudonym The Scheffield School, located in New York City. Scheffield serves students with a variety of developmental disabilities, primarily autism and intellectual disabilities. Scheffield seeks to provide an environment that meets these students' unique needs. The nature of these disabilities, as well as an overview of resources available in the school, are described in Chapter 2. Scheffield provided the opportunity for me to study teacher-student dynamics in a setting specifically designed for students with disabilities.

Although it is a private school, Scheffield serves students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Students also came from every borough of New York City and were racially diverse; for example, the cohort that attended homeroom in the classroom I worked in had three black students, three white students, two Asian-American students and two Latinx students. The heterogeneity of the student body in terms of race, class, and (relative) geography provided the opportunity to study my research question across a diverse student population.

The school has three components: the Grammar School, which serves students in grades K – 8; the Academy, which serves students in grades 9 – 12; and Independent Living, a program for individuals ages 18 – 21 that primarily focuses on vocational training. All three of these schools have summer programs. I conducted my research at the Summer Academy, which was attended by students entering grades 9 – 12 in the fall. Because the students I observed were in high school, teachers often did or said things with an eye towards their students' futures after

graduating, which made the Academy a good place to study how teachers' interactions with their students are expected to impact the students when they enter into life after school.

The summer program was attended by approximately sixty students during each three-week session; a large majority of the students at the summer program attended both sessions. Students were divided into six cohorts. These cohorts were grouped roughly by the level of independence of the student, as determined by professionals within the school, as well as divided by grade level; there were three underclassmen cohorts made up of rising 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and three upperclassmen cohorts made up of rising 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. The majority of my time was spent with the three lowerclassmen cohorts, except during all-school assemblies once a week and some field trips that involved the upperclassmen and lowerclassmen. Most of these students had attended Scheffield during the previous school year, and continued their cohort placement from the school year. Only those students whose Individualized Education Plan (IEP) specifies that they need to attend school year-round attend the Summer Academy.

Students stayed with their cohort for most of the day and rotated between classes. I conducted my observations in one classroom, which allowed me to get to know students from all the lowerclassmen cohorts, and to carefully observe teachers' interactions with these different students. The summer courses included core classes, which were Math, English Language Arts (ELA), and Theme (a social studies-oriented course that centered around a different theme each session), as well as classes taken once a week, such as Technology, Music, and Health and Movement. Each classroom was staffed by a head teacher and an assistant teacher. Also typically present in the classroom were paraprofessionals, each of whom was assigned to a particular student – although not every student had a paraprofessional – and went with this student from class to class. There were also intermittently other staff members present, such as a speech-



language pathologist, an occupational therapist, or a counselor. This number of adults in the room made it easy for me to join in and have the students accept me as another staff member.

Students only attended class in the morning until lunch, then in the afternoon participated in clubs, went swimming at a nearby public pool, or attended a Vocational Community Inclusion (VCI) experience, depending on the day of the week. VCI was intended to replace the internship experiences that students have during the regular school year. During VCI, students would learn about a vocational opportunity (e.g.: food service, retail) and observe these jobs in the community. Club opportunities varied, ranging from anime club, to running club, to movie club. While teachers could volunteer to lead a club of their choice, they were assigned to pool and VCI duty. Because of this structure, teachers were necessarily involved with their students outside of a typical classroom setting, but could choose to participate to varying degrees. Every Friday, students went on an all-day field trip to various locations connected to the session's theme. I was able to participate in these trips, which gave me the opportunity to observe students and their teachers in a variety of contexts outside of school.

## METHODS

For this study, I collected ethnographic and interview data. I accumulated about 100 hours of observations. I took field notes on interactions between teachers and students, and worked directly with students. The name of the school, students, and staff in this study have been changed or omitted to maintain confidentiality. My work mostly involved one-to-one student support, but I also assisted teachers in the classroom. My work with students often consisted of helping with classwork, such as working with them to comprehend questions and develop answers or complete tasks on a computer. Assisting teachers often meant running errands such as

bringing down attendance, helping to organize and distribute classroom supplies, and being responsible for students during off-campus excursions.

The classroom where I was placed for observations taught “Theme,” which was a course similar to social studies, centering around a different theme during each of the two sessions: “Diversity Around Us,” and “Makers and Doers.” In addition to participant-observation, I conducted interviews with five head teachers. As head teachers, they are responsible for curriculum and lesson planning, writing IEPs for their students, and overall classroom management. Of the group of teachers that I interviewed, four were women and one was a man. Three of these teachers were white, one was black, and one was Asian-American. These teachers, as well almost all of the teachers that I met, were in their 20’s and had a bachelor’s degree in either education or special education. Some were working towards their master’s degrees while teaching. Collectively, these five teachers taught a variety of subjects. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 minutes and an hour. I asked respondents questions about their background, their pathway into teaching special education, and their experience as a special education teacher, focusing on their relationships with students. I transcribed the interviews, then coded interviews and field notes using NVivo software. I followed the grounded theory tradition for coding, in which I first open coded selections of my data (two interviews and all of my field notes) and then developed my axial coding scheme from the codes that were prominent in the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

I entered Scheffield as a volunteer and a researcher. My reasons for being there were dual; I wanted to gain classroom experience and learn about working in a special education setting to prepare for my future as a special education teacher, and also conduct research through observations and interviews. My status as a volunteer meant that I had less training and

experience in working with students with disabilities than other staff, but that I was very much open to learning. The fact that I was not paid by the school also impacted my experience: I spent less time at school than other staff because I did not have to stay until the end of the day. My research is influenced by my positionality as a researcher. My analysis, including what I found notable while observing, was subject to bias as a result of the fact that I am white, come from an upper-class background, and am a queer woman. I am younger than all the other staff at the summer program, but not by much; there were several staff members, mostly paraprofessionals and assistant teachers, who were also under 25. Perhaps in part because of my closeness in age to the other staff, as well as the nature of the community of staff at Scheffield, staff members welcomed me in. From my first week, I was invited to join a group of staff at happy hour after school on Friday, which gave me the opportunity to socialize and develop camaraderie with the staff. Most people that I worked with did not know Bowdoin College, which may have mediated my status as a student at an elite liberal arts college. In the classroom, my self-presentation was occasionally relevant, as students occasionally questioned my gender based on my appearance.

## OUTLINE

Chapter 2 provides more in-depth background on special education and disability. It begins with a history of special education in the United States, up to the present day. This section includes the legal framework that sets regulations for special education. This provides the context in which Scheffield is situated. I then provide a description of the characteristics of autism and intellectual disabilities, the most common diagnoses for Scheffield students. This leads to an overview of some of the resources at Scheffield that are related to the students' disabilities. Chapter 2 is followed by an interlude that tells the story of a single day of work at Scheffield, to provide a picture of the kinds of situations teachers and other staff regularly face.

Chapter 3 discusses teachers' strategies of behavior management. Interviews with teachers revealed how they distance themselves from disciplinary measures in favor of therapeutic approaches to behavior management, mostly due to the way they see behaviors as resulting from a student's disability. These data are analyzed using a framework based in the work of Goffman and Foucault, which argues that power relations form the context for understanding interactions between students with disabilities and their non-disabled teachers.

Chapter 4 describes how teachers conceptualize and build relationships with their students. Some of the strategies they use to build "rapport," which was how teachers described their dynamic with students, included spending time with students, praising students, and working with students to set goals. Teachers see their relationships with students as relevant to students' academic success. These findings are analyzed using the literature on teacher role formation, including issues of role complexity, role conflict, role ambiguity, and teacher burnout.

Chapter 5 dives deeper into the topic of academics. The teachers in this study saw themselves as going above and beyond a traditional teacher role, particularly by teaching social and behavioral skills and life skills. This focus on life skills is related to teachers' visions of their students' futures: they expect their students to work after high school, they hope their students can live independently, and they fear their students will face marginalization. These data are analyzed through the lens of globalization and its impacts on the labor market to explore how the independence of young people with disabilities fits into this economic structuring.

Chapter 6 explores some of the tensions between theory and practice that reveal the moral complexity of teaching special education. I discuss the difficulty of determining best practices in special education when basing them in students' interests. I also acknowledge the limitations of this research, and conclude with future directions for research based on the findings in this study.

## Chapter 2: What Special Education Looks Like – Past and Present

### HISTORY

Special education has not always existed; only within the past six decades have laws been developed and employed to ensure that children with disabilities are included in public education. The initial exclusion of people with disabilities from society, and thus from education, was founded on the inaccurate understanding of people with disabilities as less than human, which led to their isolation within institutions (Spaulding and Pratt 2015). While the first special education programs, mostly for those who were Deaf or blind, began in the Enlightenment era, progress regressed between 1860 and 1950, which Spaulding and Pratt (2015) credit to the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the subsequent emergence of the eugenics movement, as well as the development of intelligence tests, all of which caused people with disabilities to face even greater stigma and oppression. Meanwhile, states began to enact mandatory attendance laws, meaning that more students with disabilities were attending public schools (Yell, Rogers, and Rogers 1998). Even when students with disabilities were allowed to attend public schools, however, they were segregated into separate spaces, so that they could not influence non-disabled students (Spaulding and Pratt 2015).

Exclusion of children with disabilities was the norm from the beginning of mandatory attendance at public schools. Children considered inferior were put into separate classrooms, but this was not limited to children with disabilities; any “children who impeded the progress of others,” including poor and immigrant children, were removed from mainstream classes in public schools or sent to separate schools (Tomlinson 2017:53). While exclusion on these characteristics is no longer the norm, there are ongoing debates about separate classrooms and schools for special education students, which continue to consider race and class as factors.

Class and race both play a significant role in the distribution of referrals to special education, thus skewing the demographics of the special education student population. Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) found that there are a disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minority students in special education. This disproportionality has been linked to poverty, as researchers have argued that poverty produces differences in children that lead them to be referred to special education (O'Connor and Fernandez 2006). O'Connor and Fernandez problematize this framework by noting that disproportionality only occurs in “judgmental,” or subjective, categories of disability. In order for a student to be entered into one of these categories, they must be determined to not meet the same standards, either in terms of cognitive processes or behavior, as their peers. O'Connor and Fernandez argue that because “middle-class Whites provide the referent against which other children are evaluated,” poor and minority students are “destined” to be understood as having learning and behavior differences, and thus referred to special education (8). Therefore, while race and class may no longer be explicit grounds on which to place students in special education programs, they still implicitly shape understandings of who does and does not belong in general education.

From a legal standpoint, however, schools at this point in history are required to include students to a particular degree. Yell et al. (1998) credit the Civil Rights movement, and *Brown v. Board of Education* in particular, with providing the legal groundwork for the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools at the federal level. Despite the fact that the *Brown* decision was passed in 1954, however, it wasn't until 1975 that the first piece of federal legislation, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed, following two Supreme Court cases that solidified the understanding of children with disabilities as a protected class deserving of equal educational opportunity (Yell et al. 1998). These Court cases established that

all children with disabilities should receive a public education that is most similar to the education that children without disabilities receive, as well as led to both the establishment of due process safeguards and a mandate that the District provide all students with disabilities a public education (Yell et al. 1998). Through these litigations, the Supreme Court provided the legal backing for federal legislation to be created to protect the rights of children with disabilities.

The EAHCA became the first piece of federal special education legislation when it was signed into law by President Ford in 1975. The EAHCA established key rights for students with disabilities in the American public school system. It mandated that in order to receive federal funding, which most public schools do despite being under local control, schools must provide students with disabilities “a free, appropriate education” in the “least restrictive environment,” terminology which is still used today to argue for greater inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Yell et al. 1998). EAHCA also mandated the rights of students with disabilities to receive nondiscriminatory testing and placement procedures and procedural due process, as well as established the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is used to plan and implement a specialized educational program for all students with a documented disability (Yell et al. 1998). All of these are key factors for the inclusion and equitable application of special education in the U.S. public school system, provided initially by the EAHCA.

The current federal legislation regarding special education is an amended version of the EAHCA, now called the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), which was updated in 1990 and again in 1997 (Yell et al. 1998). These amendments have changed the language used to refer to students with disabilities (from “handicapped student” to “student with a disability”) and updated the requirements of the IEP to include a plan for transition for students over 16, as

well as more regulated benchmarks and measures of effectiveness (Yell et al. 1998). These are the current laws that guide the practices of educators who teach students with disabilities throughout the United States and that set the standards for special education.

While these laws generally apply to public schools, in the case of special education, private schools can be involved in a number of ways as well. The first that private schools may be affected is that IDEA requires that public school districts spend a “proportionate share” of the federal funding they receive from IDEA on students with disabilities who are enrolled by their parents in private schools in the district (Samuels 2018). This money is intended to cover services that students with disabilities require that private schools may not already provide. The second way in which private schools interact with IDEA is that if a public school district is unable to provide a “free and appropriate education” (FAPE), meaning that they cannot provide the services mandated by a student’s IEP, the district must pay for a family’s tuition fees for the student to be enrolled at a private school that can meet their needs (Associated Press 2009). This point in particular is relevant to my research because this study was conducted at a special education private school. Many of the students were enrolled at Scheffield because their public school could not provide the services they needed, but their tuition was paid by the district, while others were enrolled by their parents, who then paid full tuition, meaning that there were students of a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds at Scheffield.

### *Inclusion*

Despite the fact that public schools are legally required to serve students with disabilities in “the least restrictive environment,” debates continue to this day about the degree of inclusion that is best for students with and without disabilities in public schools. The contemporary inclusion debate generally revolves around the extent to which children with disabilities are



integrated into the mainstream classroom. Controversies surround the type of disabilities that are compatible with full inclusion, the degree to which a child who spends time in a separate classroom should be included in the mainstream classroom, and what practices educators should use in order to best serve the needs of all students. Osgood (2005) highlights seven core issues that comprise the debates about inclusion:

1. Efficacy: whether inclusion helps all students to succeed to their fullest potential
2. Efficiency and economy: whether inclusion is the best use of educational resources
3. Territory: what parties are responsible for decision making about inclusion
4. Community: includes debates about community building both between students with and without disabilities as well as community among people with disabilities
5. Legality: what is required of schools by the law as well as what they can do beyond the bare minimum provided by law
6. Power and identity: how inclusion relates to societal dynamics surrounding disability
7. Axiology: the ethical components of inclusion (as opposed to legal or practical)

These seven issues comprise a framework for understanding why inclusion is not simple or straightforward, and thus why it is unevenly applied across schooling systems and even between individual students.

Because of the complexities of the nature of inclusion, it is difficult to make generalizations about who is going to be included in a mainstream classroom and for whom that will be a space in which they succeed. The federal government, however, collects data that describes the distribution of students across different special education settings. According to the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress on the implementation of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education 2017), inclusion is becoming increasingly common for students with disabilities. For students

ages 6 through 21 who are served under IDEA, 62.7% are inside a “regular classroom” 80% or more of the day, 18.7% are inside a regular classroom 40%-79% of the day, 13.5% are inside the regular classroom less than 40% of the day, and 5.2% are educated in “other environments.” These environments include separate schools (2.8%), residential facilities (0.3%), homebound/hospital environment (0.4%), correctional facilities (0.2%), and parentally placed in private schools (1.5%). The students at Scheffield are a part of the 3.3% of students that are served in special schools, either through parental placement or because their public district could not provide for the student’s needs. It is important to note that this study, therefore, only gives a limited view of special education experiences, as only a small portion of the special education population receives their education in a setting like Scheffield.

## AUTISM AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

While I was not privy to the exact diagnoses of most of the students that I worked with, from my conversations with teachers and from my observations, it became clear during my time there that most students at Scheffield would fall under the category of having intellectual disabilities and/or autism. I was not provided information about students’ diagnoses because under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), students’ educational records must remain private except to students and their families, and under IDEA, information related to special education services, which may include a student’s disability diagnosis, is a part of their educational record (NCES n.d.). In this section, I will give a brief description of how intellectual disabilities and autism manifest themselves, and highlight a few behaviors and characteristics that result from these disabilities that were relevant to my research.

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2018), “intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations both

in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and in adaptive behavior, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills.” Intellectual disabilities therefore form a broad category that can contain a variety of different diagnoses. All individuals with intellectual disabilities, however, face challenges in a traditional school setting because of their difficulty with both aspects of learning and tasks of daily life. Schools like Scheffield employ Adaptive Skills curricula to assist with the development of students’ adaptive behavior, utilize specialized teaching methods, and modify their curricula to address students’ different learning needs.

Autism, sometimes referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD, is a developmental disability that “impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction, communication skills, and cognitive function” (National Autism Association n.d.). Intellectual disability and autism are not mutually exclusive categories; more than half of individuals diagnosed with autism also have an intellectual disability or borderline intellectual disability (National Autism Association n.d.). Autism’s impact on social and language development mean that teaching social and communication skills are emphasized at a school like Scheffield.

Autism manifests itself in a wide variety of ways, hence it being referred to as a spectrum disorder. Munsun et al. (2008:439) explain that “[t]hese differences in presentation make conceptualization of the disorder difficult.” In other words, because people with autism may have a very wide range of behaviors, challenges, and cognitive differences, it is difficult to determine who qualifies as a person with autism. This has led to some debate about the diagnosis of autism/ASD, which heightened after the release of the DSM-5. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) is a document used by practitioners in the field of mental health and disability to diagnose “mental disorders,” which includes autism (APA n.d.). The DSM is revised regularly, and the most recent version, the DSM-5, changed the criteria for

diagnosing an individual with autism; while in the DSM-4 there were 2,027 symptom combinations that would result in a diagnosis of autism, in the DSM-5 there are only 11 (Leveto 2018). This has led to concern that some people, anywhere between 36% and 47.8% , who were previously diagnosed with autism no longer meet the criteria for diagnosis (Leveto 2018). These changes reflect the nature of autism as difficult to define, and also exemplify the ongoing debates among professionals as to who belongs in the category of people with autism.

While autism is a very heterogeneous disability in terms of characteristics that manifest, one common feature is difficulty understanding social norms. Research has found that when individuals with autism are presented with videos of social scenarios, they are less accurate in identifying actions that are considered inappropriate behavior and have greater difficulty explaining why behaviors are inappropriate than their peers without autism (Loveland et al. 2001). Additionally, Nah and Poon (2011) found that individuals with autism were more likely to identify appropriate scenarios as “strange” than their peers, and more frequently gave justifications that did not reflect social awareness. These findings suggest that people with autism are less likely to have a solid understanding of social expectations than their neurotypical peers.

Another challenge commonly faced by people with autism is issues with sensory processing. Research has found that difficulty with sensory processing is one of the most common clinical features found in children with autism (Kern et al. 2006). This can manifest itself in the form of sensory overload, in which people with autism become overwhelmed by, for example, bright lights, multiple different sounds, or a combination of such sensory experiences; it can also manifest in a fixation on or a need for increased sensory stimulation (Kern et al. 2006). Both of these manifestations may cause behaviors that autistic individuals use to cope with sensory stimuli, such as “stimming,” a behavior which I will describe below.

There are a few aspects of the lived experience of autism that became apparent through my research process. When researching behaviors related to autism, the sources that I most commonly found were social resources, such as blogs by mothers or other caretakers of children with autism, that sought to help other parents understand, cope with, and in some cases, particularly when the behavior may be a danger to the child or others, control their child's behaviors. This trend points to two key things: first, that official research on the everyday behaviors of autistic children is difficult to find, suggesting that this research may be underrepresented in academia, and second, that parenting children with autism can be a difficult task. The development of social solidarity among parents of autistic children potentially comes from having few resources to help with the raising of autistic children, especially from others who can empathize with and understand the peculiarities of raising a child with autism.

There are a few behaviors associated with autism that were prevalent among the student population and contributed to daily life at Scheffield. These were often controlled or managed by teachers, paraprofessionals, or students themselves, but at times they escalated into disruptive behaviors. As one example, students often took part in various forms of stimming, or self-stimulation, which is common among autistic individuals as a way to manage sensory input and emotions (Wang n.d.). Scheffield provided many opportunities for students to stim safely and in a way that did not disrupt the flow of classroom life, such as rocking chairs and a "sensory toolbox," which was filled with tools that students could use to help with sensory processing, such as fidget tools that they could use to stim, or noise-canceling ear muffs that they could wear if they were overwhelmed by sound. Some examples of stimming include a student who would jump up and down while flapping his hands, students who would rock their bodies while sitting,

and students who would slap their hands against their legs or arms. These stims were handled in various ways by staff members, but are understood to be an aspect of the students' disabilities.

Another common behavior in autistic children and adolescents is scripting, also known as delayed echolalia. When autistic individuals script, they repeat words or phrases that they have heard elsewhere. Scripts can be used either interactively, or non-interactively, which means that students would sometimes use scripts to participate in conversation, but sometimes they would simply use them to stim (Positive Partnerships Institute n.d.). As an example of non-interactive scripting, students would repeat the dialogue of movies or TV shows out loud. Sometimes students would seek someone to complete the other part of the dialogue, but often they would just script, either quietly or loudly, to themselves. Other times, students may repeat phrases they had heard from their peers, adults, or media, but would use them to respond to a question or as a way of expressing something they wanted or needed, in which case it was interactive.

These behaviors are relevant insofar as they impact autistic individuals' efforts to take part in social institutions. One concern is the ability of autistic individuals and those with intellectual disabilities to work. Working conditions are often inaccessible for people with disabilities, and tasks that may be considered low-skill may still be difficult for people who are easily overwhelmed by stimuli. As one researcher explains, "autistics will not thrive in all careers. Given their social differences, they will often struggle in people-oriented fields, such as retail or customer service" (Motttron 2011). Take, for example, working at a fast food restaurant, generally considered an occupation suitable for those with limited education. Social interaction with customers may be difficult for an autistic person who experiences challenges with communication. Working in the kitchen may be noisy, or the mixture of smells from different foods cooking may similarly produce sensory overload. Given these considerations, it is clear

that the majority of jobs may have built-in barriers that make such work inaccessible to people with autism or intellectual disabilities without additional help.

### *Resources*

In order to help students cope with the behaviors they experience as a result of their disabilities, and to help them obtain skills that can benefit them, the summer program offered several resources. There were two full-time occupational therapists on staff, each classroom was equipped with a sensory toolbox, and there is a sensory room in the building. These resources helped students to cope with day-to-day experiences. For example, when we knew there would be a fire drill, teachers warned students in advance, and an occupational therapist would hand out extra ear muffs. At least one student wore his ear muffs throughout morning assembly, presumably because the amount of people talking in one room overwhelmed him. While I became familiar with a few items in it, I am not sure the exact contents of the sensory toolbox, mostly because my homeroom was the cohort that is considered the most independent, meaning that they may have had less severe needs than other students, and thus made less use of the sensory toolbox and other adaptive features.

While I had heard mention of the sensory room repeatedly throughout my time at Schefffield, I did not enter the room until the very end of the summer. What I found was a room that provided a variety of ways in for students to channel their energy and sensory processing. Most of the floor and one of the walls was covered in blue mats, and constructed above the blue mats was a large apparatus made of black metal. I asked the occupational therapist if the students climb that, but she told me, “Oh no, they know better than to do that,” letting me know that climbing was not its intended purpose. I learned that there is a swing that is hung from the apparatus. One of the other walls was a climbing wall, which stretched the length of the room so

that students could climb across it. Near that wall was an exercise bike. There was also a small room off of this main area. This room was fully padded, and dark, which allowed students a dark, quiet place where they would be able to recover from sensory overload.

While looking around at some of the materials in the room, I pulled out a laminated piece of paper from an wall-mounted file holder. It was a student's occupational therapy routine. The sheet was made up of pictures of each exercise that were labeled with the name of it. For example, one of the exercises was "crawl," and had a picture of the student doing an army crawl across the padded floor. It was unclear to me the exact use of the sheet; one possibility was that this student came up to the room every morning and did the exercises that were on the sheet. Another was that the student could use the sheet to point to an exercise that they wanted to do, which I thought it might be because it looked like other forms of communication used by non-verbal students. I knew that the student whose sheet it was communicated verbally, but I still wondered if this was a tool to make the decision-making process easier by providing him with clear options. It might have also been used in both ways, depending on the context. Either way, the presence of pictures and words made it clear to me that this was intended to help the student comprehend the range of options they had for activities that they could do during physical therapy. The use of this sheet could be extended to improving a student's independence, because as they learn this repertoire of exercises, they may have been able to begin to use them themselves without prompting, increasing their self-advocacy.

Another important resource at Scheffield was the Adaptive Skills program and classroom. This program was focused on providing students with life skills that would be important for them navigating the world on their own. As mentioned earlier, students with intellectual disabilities exhibit difficulty with adaptive behaviors, such as making purchases, travelling, doing laundry,



and cooking. The room that is used for Adaptive Skills classes reflects these learning goals. It is a large room in the basement of the building, with a divider cutting the room in half; on one side, there are large circular tables, which allows the room to be used as a classroom or a meeting location. On the other side of the divider, there is a washer and dryer and a counter to use for folding laundry. There are also two smaller rooms off of this main room. One is a small kitchen with a sink, cabinets of kitchen supplies, and an oven, stove, and microwave. The other small room has shelves lining the walls and a window in one wall that opens to the larger room. This space is used as the school store, where students are able to both work as cashiers and make purchases, giving them opportunities to practice both vocational and adaptive skills.

### Interlude: A Day in the Life

Every Friday, staff chaperoned the students on a community immersion trip. During the summer, these trips are always related to the “theme” of the session. Our second Friday trip, which was related to the first session’s theme of “Diversity Around Us,” was to El Taller Americano, a Latin American cultural community center. To get to the Center, we had to take the subway, which facilitated students’ engagement in what the staff of Scheffield refer to as “travel training.” When we moved around the city, groups of three or four students would be assigned to one staff member, or two staff members if one of the students had a paraprofessional assigned to them. The staff member(s) in charge of their group of students were responsible for being able to see them at all times and ensuring that they followed directions. I was always partnered with Mr. Franklin, the assistant teacher from my classroom, during these excursions; as I was not a full staff member, they did not give me sole responsibility over any students. We traveled through the city in one long line, broken up by a staff member every few students, everyone wearing matching Scheffield t-shirts and the students wearing ID’s on lanyards around their necks. When we got to the subway, we all lined up against one wall while a staff member talked to the MTA staff to utilize the school’s group fare and had them open the emergency gate to make it easier for the group to walk through. On the platform, students would line up against the wall and staff stood between them and the edge of the platform. We would split the large group between two train cars so as not to overwhelm any single space. Throughout the train ride, we would talk with the students, occasionally quizzing them on their travel plans: “What stop are we getting off at? How many stops are we riding? How many stops do we have left?”

We walked from the subway station to El Taller Americano, where the group was led to a room in the basement. There, three long sheets of paper were set up on the ground. Teachers

began strategically placing students around the sheets; students who may need more attention or support from a staff member were placed near the ends so that a teacher could sit next to them and keep them on task. This one-on-one guidance was being given in addition to instructions that were being called to the whole room by a staff member from El Taller Americano. Scheffield staff would often have to repeat his instructions to students, which began to get confusing when the staff misunderstood or misinterpreted his instructions. At one point, the students had been instructed to spread yellow paint with paint rollers and had been told that this would be the start of the “earth” of the painting. As the students were doing this, Ms. Daniels called out to them, “Remember, you’re painting the sun!” Another teacher who was sitting next to me said, as though she were annoyed with the instructions Ms. Daniels was giving, “They’re not painting the sun.” Later, while the students were rolling out blue paint for the sky, Ms. Daniels called out something about painting the clouds. The teacher next to me said, “See, people aren’t listening. She said this is the clouds. It’s not the clouds, it’s the sky.”

The students as a whole remained relatively focused for the majority of the activity, but as they finished tasks and were no longer sure what to do, they began to get somewhat restless. Several students approached teachers as the activity began to wind down, asking if they could wash their hands. We told them to wait until after they cleaned up. For a few students, this was clearly much more difficult. Ryan, one of the boys in our homeroom cohort, kept saying, “I don’t like to be dirty.” The sensation of having paint on his hands was making him very anxious, so we let him go to the bathroom to wash it off.

As we were rounding up the students after the workshop had ended, I witnessed an interaction between a student and a paraprofessional that brought race explicitly into the conversation. A student, Howard, a sophomore who is Asian American, repeatedly called a

black, male paraprofessional “Mr. Rihanna.” While the paraprofessional initially ignored it, eventually he responded, “Okay, Jackie Chan!” I was standing near one of the speech-language pathologists (SLPs), and we both witnessed this interaction. We both looked at each other with confusion about what had just gone on. She said to me, “What was that? Was that like, a race thing?” I responded, “I don’t know.” She called Howard over, and asked, “Why do you call Mr. S., Mr. Rihanna?” The student said, “Because he looks like Rihanna.” “But why do you think he looks like Rihanna?” the SLP asked. Howard did not respond to this question, so she followed up with, “Rihanna is a woman, Mr. S. is a man.” After wrapping up that conversation with Howard, the SLP turned to me and said, “I still don’t know what that was.” I told her, “I don’t know, you’d have to ask Mr. S. for his read on it.” She proceeded to get his attention and asked, “Why does Howard call you Mr. Rihanna?” to which Mr. S. responded, “Because he’s a racist!”

After the mural-making activity, we left El Taller and headed to a park just up the block so that students and teachers could eat lunch and students could get some time to play outside. We entered a fenced-in concrete area with a basketball hoop, some benches, and a couple of picnic tables. On the other side of one of the fences was a large playground area, also fenced-in. The students sat down, mostly among the picnic tables, and the staff sat along a couple of long benches against the brick wall of the building that bordered the area. We ate our lunches and chatted amongst ourselves. Occasionally, staff members (mostly paraprofessionals) would call out to students to instruct them to do something, such as pick up trash that had fallen under their table. As people finished eating, some of the boys in our homeroom cohort took out their Nintendo DS portable video game consoles and began playing games against each other. The paraprofessional who was assigned to a boy in this cohort, even though this boy was not one of the ones playing video games, decided to try to get the boys off of their games to play a physical

game, so he started up a game of Ninja. I joined in, which gave me and the paraprofessional a chance to enjoy a fun and physical game with the students.

After our game of Ninja, staff asked if any of the students wanted to go to the other area to play on the playground. A few students raised their hands, and a proportionate number of staff members walked over with them. To get from where we ate lunch to the playground required walking a short distance on the sidewalk alongside the road that connected the two entrances. At one point in the midst of this transition, a student took off running while he was on the sidewalk. His paraprofessional chased after him, and caught up to him on the sidewalk. She walked him back in to the concrete area where I still was with some of the students and staff. We asked her what happened, and she told us that he had decided he did not want to be on the playground anymore, and had run out of the playground area by himself, but that he had only intended to return to the concrete area. She had told him not to run off on his own and to tell her if he wanted to change locations, because she had been scared that he might have run away or into the street.

Eventually, it came time to leave the playground so we could take the subway back and get to school with enough time for the students to write a reflection about their trip before dismissal. As we gathered the students to leave, a paraprofessional discovered that her student, Alvin, was sitting at a picnic table with his head down on his arms on the tabletop. We had lined all the students up on the sidewalk, but she was still talking to him, trying to convince him to stand up and walk with her. Eventually, one other teacher stayed behind with her and the rest of the group left, to make sure there was enough time for the travel back. As we were walking, Mr. Franklin and I asked another paraprofessional what had happened with Alvin. "They put him in an Uber," she said, clearly disbelieving and disapproving. "Oh, that was a bad idea," Mr. Franklin responded, "Now he's gonna do that every time." "Exactly," the paraprofessional said,

“That was everything they shouldn’t have done.” Mr. Franklin and the paraprofessional continued to talk about the decision to let him take a taxi home, and the paraprofessional explained that she thought that he should not have been able to end up in that position in the first place. “You gotta keep him moving,” she said. “They know he’s a plover! They let him sit still for too long.” It was true that earlier in the summer, staff had been briefed that Alvin was a “plover,” meaning that in the past, on trips, he had just “plopped down” and refused to move. This paraprofessional was arguing that his paraprofessional should have been paying more attention to him, and kept him engaged in some activity so that he did not have the chance to settle in one spot and plop.

As we walked back to the subway station, Mr. Franklin and I were near a student, Michael, who was scripting PBS commercials to himself. Michael was wearing a blue swim cap over his hair, which his paraprofessional kept having to readjust for him. I asked Mr. Franklin why Michael wore the swim cap, to which Mr. Franklin responded, “He pulls out his hair. But they need to just cut his hair! They need to shave it. He can’t go around wearing that everywhere. People stare at him, it’s not fair to him. It makes him look ridiculous.” Mr. Franklin felt that the swim cap made Michael’s disability more visible, and that this was something that should be avoided for his own benefit of not facing the judgment of people who might stare at him for wearing a swim cap or draw conclusions about his disability.

### Chapter 3: Teaching Self-Control as Social Control

As discussed in Chapter 2, people with autism often exhibit characteristics not usually seen in neurotypical people. Scholars place the non-normative behaviors of individuals with autism, and reactions to those behaviors, in the context of power relations. Goffman and Foucault's theories of total institutions may provide a framework for understanding power relations at Scheffield. Goffman (1961) considers total institutions to be sites of coercion capable of altering people's behaviors. Additionally, Foucault's (1977) theory on disciplinary regimes argues that society has moved from using spectacle as punishment to controlling individuals through a web of power in which people discipline themselves into "docile bodies." The presence of power throughout society means that people are under constant surveillance from the rest of society, which causes people to engage in self-discipline. Goffman (1963) also argues that labeling individuals contributes to surveillance and control by imposing an identity on them.

Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut (2012) use the theories of Goffman and Foucault to contextualize the power dynamic between people with intellectual disabilities and their caretakers within a group home. While this setting differs slightly from a school, the dynamic between group home residents and their caretakers and the students at Scheffield and their teachers is comparable in that teachers and caretakers are neurotypical people responsible for individuals with intellectual disabilities/autism. Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut argue that labeling individuals as having an intellectual disability subjects them to forms of surveillance and control related to that imposed identity. They examine referrals to health professionals through the group home system, which are intended to lead to changes in their health management plan (i.e.: medication) and conclude that these referrals are used as a means to discipline and control individuals with disabilities. According to Nunkoosing and Haydon-

Laurelut's framework, when residents resist the rules imposed on them or the authority of those in charge of them, they are viewed as challenging and are thereby seen as in need of discipline through these referrals and subsequent bodily interventions. This framework may be relevant to Scheffield because of the presence of counselors, occupational therapists, and other specialists who may serve the role of a professional who can intervene in the realm of behavior.

## BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

A large part of the work that teachers do every day in their classroom revolves around managing student behavior. For teachers to be listened to and for work to take place in the classroom, students must be behaving within certain bounds. Teachers want to ensure that their students are staying on task and not making it difficult for others to stay on task. The teachers in this study tended to distance themselves from using strict discipline, favoring a therapeutic approach for behavior management, and framing this within the context of students' disabilities.

### *Distance from Discipline*

In interviews, teachers often did not want to seem as though they were strict. They claimed that they did not use traditional disciplinary measures or punishments, and made such approaches seem like an undesirable way to manage a classroom. Ms. Adams, when talking about the rules that she sets in order to teach her students certain life skills, said:

I've tried ... in my relationship with students, [to] just make sure not to be harsh ... just to make sure that there is that standard of like, okay, you are practicing certain skills when you're in the classroom.... It's not like a strict classroom or anything.

She does not want the standards that she maintains in her classroom to make her seem tough on students, nor does she want to be seen as using strict discipline. She sets standards in order to allow her students to practice skills, but not as a matter of discipline.



Ms. Adams also distances herself from what may be considered traditional methods of discipline. She will have conversations with students when they behave disruptively to find out what is going on, rather than discipline them. She connected these tactics to student motivation:

It's like, that's more motivation, or [it's] more successful, I find, than being like, "Okay, what's gonna be the consequence when I give you detention?" But they don't, I don't think they really care about detention, homework, like those things don't work.

She believes that students are more motivated to correct their behavior when she and her students work through a difficult moment together. Because punishments mean nothing to the students, they are ineffective in correcting student behavior.

Teachers also felt that disciplining students may negatively impact their relationship with their students. Ms. Brown distanced herself from discipline, but still felt that the ways in which she enforced rules with her students may have made them like her less:

It's difficult because...I don't necessarily want to discipline them, but I want them to learn natural consequences, so sometimes you'll have a kid that doesn't do any work, or won't do any work during the period, and can I force him? No, there's nothing I can do. But I can just say, "If you don't finish, you know, naturally, you're going to have to stay during recess." So it's not like detention, but you know, if you don't finish it now...the work has to get done.... So I think...using that, I mean, I'm probably not their favorite teacher for those reasons...but I, you know, I feel like we need to hold them to expectations. Just 'cause they have these special needs, doesn't mean they're not expected to...get what [needs to get] done, done.

She directly states that she does not want to discipline her students, echoing that notion that Ms. Adams puts forth that disciplinary actions are an undesirable tactic for teachers to use. She describes the repercussions for students who do not finish their work as being "not like detention," but instead a learning experience where they gain an understanding of the consequences of their actions. By claiming that she does not use traditional methods of discipline, she compares herself to teachers who do not work in special education, who she

assumes use tactics like detention to discipline their students. Ultimately, though, she still feels as though holding her students to expectations may make students like her less.

### *Therapeutic Approach*

Instead of using disciplinary measures, teachers use what they describe as a “therapeutic approach.” Teachers varied in what they described as a therapeutic approach. Ms. Daniels described some of the approaches she would take to disruptive behavior:

I would consider disruptive behavior probably not what other teachers would consider disruptive behavior, so I think if...I feel like it's impacting learning, I'll probably go over to the student and be like, “Hey, can you, like, focus back on your work?” or, you know, “Do you need to take a break?” Things like that. ...Yeah, I think, in a way of like, a therapeutic approach, probably, to their disruptive behavior is what I do, which is like, “Do you need to go to the sensory room?”

She starts off by positioning herself as different from other teachers, presumably teachers who teach general education rather than special education, by saying that she has different standards for disruptive behavior. She offers some ways she might intervene, such as redirecting a student back to their work, or giving them the option to take a break or go to the sensory room. None of these are considered punishment, but rather therapeutic.

Occasionally, I saw students threatened with punitive measures, but they were rarely followed through with and were usually forgone in favor of a therapeutic approach. During my observations, I never witnessed a teacher threaten a student with a disciplinary measure, but I did observe paraprofessionals do so. The following situation shows this approach in which a paraprofessional threatened discipline, but she ultimately followed a therapeutic approach for a student who was being highly disruptive during class.

Towards the beginning of a class, Mr. Franklin walked past a student, Leo, to get to the board and accidentally poked him with a pen. Leo began to repeatedly yell, “Ow!” and when his

paraprofessional told him that it did not hurt him and that it was just an accident, he yelled, “He did it on purpose!” Mr. Franklin kept calm, apologizing for poking Leo and reassuring him that it was just an accident. Leo’s paraprofessional continued to tell him that Mr. Franklin was “just playing around.” Still, Leo could not be calmed down, and it was clear that he had been set off. When the students started doing work, Leo refused to answer any of the questions on his worksheet, and kept yelling loudly at his paraprofessional when she prompted him to do his work. The tipping point came when Leo picked up his worksheet and ripped it in half. “You’ll get a detention for that!” his paraprofessional chided him. “NO!” Leo yelled, “NO!” His para got him a new worksheet and told him again that he was going to have a detention. “NO! I DON’T WANT TO!” Leo yelled over and over, although it was unclear whether he meant he did not want to do his worksheet or did not want to have a detention. Unable to calm him down, Leo’s paraprofessional decided that it was time for him to go see a counselor. She had him stand up, and then directed him towards the door by putting a hand on his shoulder to guide him out. “DON’T TOUCH ME!” Leo yelled. The paraprofessional, who was clearly growing frustrated, said to herself, but loud enough that I heard it, “Stop complaining!” Even though she was no longer touching him, Leo again yelled, “DON’T TOUCH ME!” and his paraprofessional responded, “Okay, okay!” and walked him out of the classroom.

The fact that this student had a paraprofessional assigned to him suggests that disruptive behaviors may be common, and that his behavior frequently needs managing. In light of this, it is likely that taking him to see a counselor was a strategy his paraprofessional often used with him. The paraprofessional’s threat of detention seemed to be an attempt to immediately redirect him to his work, but when that was unsuccessful, she realized that a therapeutic approach was what was actually needed to change his behavior. While she was not as inclined to distance herself

from disciplinary measures as teachers were, she ultimately utilized therapeutic resources to calm his disruptive behaviors.

Sometimes, a therapeutic approach was very simple, such as when a student was rocking in his chair in a dangerous way. The head teacher in the classroom said to him, “If you want to move your body like that, there are tools to do that over there. You can’t move the chair up and down like that, it’s unsafe. Or use a rocker!” The tools she was referencing were in the sensory toolbox that is kept in the classroom, and she also offered him a “rocker,” or a classroom chair specially designed for students to be able to rock their bodies back and forth. The teacher deemed this student’s behavior disruptive, likely because it had the potential to cause him harm. Rather than getting him in trouble, she offered him therapeutic tools and explained to him why his behavior was not okay for the classroom.

Ms. Adams described a different therapeutic approach that she uses when students are being disruptive:

The other most effective method would be...that map thing where it’s like you did this behavior, like you’re yelling at your table and not focused, so I’m getting angry, so I’m gonna tell you to leave the room, and you’re gonna feel upset. And trying to map out the consequences of your behavior...

Ms. Adams describes this “behavior mapping” throughout her interview, and it appears to be the method that she uses the most. She considers this a therapeutic approach because it seeks not to punish the student for their behavior, but to help her student understand how their behavior is affecting other people and making others feel.

At other times, when faced with more challenging disruptive behaviors, teachers would involve other specialists to employ a therapeutic approach, such as a counselor or an occupational therapist. For example, one student, Miles, had a moment one day that required multiple interventions, ending with a specialist. Miles was relatively high-functioning and so was

able to work independently fairly well. Because of this, he did not often need re-direction as much as some of the other students in his cohort. Sometimes, however, he would try to find ways to get out of doing his work. One day, when he had finished his worksheet before most of his classmates, Ms. Daniels told him, “Go get a computer and finish what you were working on yesterday.” But Miles’ head was on the table, and he did not respond to her or make an effort to move toward the laptops. When Ms. Daniels noticed this, she walked over to him and crouched down by his side.

“Miles, are you tired? Do you want to go get a drink of water?”

Miles lifted his head to look at her. “Yes, I’m tired,” he told her, “I went to bed late last night.” He got up and left the classroom to go to the water fountain, but when he came back, he still did not go get a computer from the shelf. Ms. Daniels was busy working with another student, so seeing that Miles was doing nothing, I approached him, telling him, “Miles, go get a computer so you can finish your work from yesterday.” He was sitting back in his chair, and without looking up at me, he said, “I need to go to the bathroom.” When I did not respond right away, he said, “I need to wash my hands.”

“You just went to get water,” I said to him, so that he knew that I knew that this was not the first time he was trying to leave the classroom after being told to start working, “But if you need to wash your hands, you can go quickly.”

“But I need a teacher to go with me,” Miles said, looking up at me now.

“No you don’t,” I told him, “You can go by yourself.” This time, Miles did not respond, but he did not move either. I walked away, hoping that he would either go to the bathroom on his own or go get a laptop, thereby behaving independently, or else that someone else in the room would be more successful at directing him. After a minute or two, the occupational therapist in

the room went up to him and asked if he wanted to go splash some water on his face. I did not hear the rest of their conversation, but it seemed as though Miles told the OT what he told me, that he needed a teacher to go with him, because after they talked for a bit, the OT walked with him out of the classroom and then walked back into the classroom with him a short while later. I do not know if she brought him to splash water on his face or perhaps to the sensory room, but in either case, she had allowed him to do what I had not, which was have an adult accompany him on his break from the classroom. When the head teacher's therapeutic approach was unsuccessful, and my own approach also failed, the occupational therapist intervened to continue to try to apply therapeutic strategies, this time with the ability to use her specialist knowledge.

### *Behavior Based on Disability*

The use of therapeutic approaches is often tied to a distinction between disruptive behaviors that are more “typical” and those that are based on a student's disability. Ms. Daniels describes, “if it's like, actual disruptive behaviors based on their disability, I think I do more of a therapeutic approach.” Ms. Adams sees behaviors that are not based on a student's disability as more difficult than those that are, saying, “the hardest stuff to deal with is, like, typical high school behaviors, not behaviors because of your disability but behaviors ‘cause you're just a teenager.” The reason for using a therapeutic approach is because the behavior is a result of a student's disability, as opposed to disruptive behaviors that may be seen in a student who does not have a disability, which would be more deserving of punishment.

Ms. Edwards echoed the sentiments of Ms. Adams and Ms. Daniels that there are certain behaviors that are based on a student's disability that are best managed in a different way:

If it's something that is related to their disability, obviously I take a different approach to it. I do a lot of pulling students out into the hallway, asking if everything's okay,

acknowledging that I notice that this is not how they are typically and that there's something that's different, and try to figure out...what might be causing that.

Ms. Edwards emphasizes that she takes a different approach depending on whether she sees the behavior as coming from the student's disability or not. While she sees her students as typically behaving in a non-disruptive way, their disability may sometimes cause them to act outside of that. With behaviors that come from a student's disability, she wants to work with the student to determine the root cause of their behavior. She again repudiates any kind of disciplinary tactics, but instead takes an approach that involves the student and seeks to understand their behavior and make changes that can resolve it.

Ms. Daniels described more specifically some behaviors that could be seen as resulting from a student's disability. When talking about what factors may impact her relationship with a student, she said:

I try to never turn like the students away in terms of like, you know, as you see, a lot of them "script," like a lot of them want you to just say whatever they want you to say back to them, which is called "baiting talking," and...I try and do it to a degree, 'cause... they're probably not gonna be able to do this like when they go home, or any other time in the day. So I think yeah, their disability, ...if they have really friends in the school, things like that.

By following her description of scripting and baiting talking with directly addressing their disability as a factor that may impact her relationship with a student, she implies that these behaviors resulting from a student's disability. For her, even when a student's behaviors are based on their disability, there is value in accepting them, especially when they are not disruptive, as the students may not be able to have this kind of interaction with anyone else.

## ANALYSIS

These moments demonstrate the importance, for teachers, of identifying behaviors that are considered disruptive and inappropriate and finding ways to help students understand their

behaviors by educating them in social norms. Teachers employ their own frameworks to explain these transgressions of normative boundaries and how they deal with them. Teachers distance themselves from a “disciplinary” regime in favor of a “therapeutic” one. The practices, however, can be seen as falling within the parameters of Foucault’s disciplinary regime in some ways, while in other ways, their practices diverge from scholars’ analyses of power dynamics involving people with disabilities. When it comes to discipline, teachers’ moral frameworks conflict with critical scholars’ social theories, revealing the tension between care and control.

Foucault’s (1977) concept of a disciplinary regime does not necessarily exactly align with what teachers define as disciplinary actions. Teachers’ general understanding of discipline is relatively narrow, and involves actions that punish a student for a given behavior. Foucault’s disciplinary regime is more concerned with the ways in which institutional structures seek to engage individuals in self-discipline. Therefore, when Ms. Brown says, “I don’t necessarily want to discipline them, but I want them to learn natural consequences,” she is both distancing herself from discipline while simultaneously encouraging the sort of disciplinary regime that Foucault theorizes guides our society. She wants her students to learn the “natural consequences” of their actions, which she has deemed inappropriate, so that they will not perform the same actions again. Learning the consequences of their actions, whatever that may be, means that they are able to control their behaviors without punishment from an authority figure, which is what Foucault would consider disciplinary, even if the teachers do not understand it in that way.

Because teachers can see themselves as not engaging in discipline but still be implicated in the webs of power of Foucault’s disciplinary regime, the framework of a “therapeutic approach” that teachers use to describe their actions should be interrogated to see if it is another feature of the same power relations. The therapeutic approach takes several forms. One is the use



of “behavior mapping,” which some of the teachers use to help students understand the way their actions impact others. While behavior mapping, like the concept of “natural consequences,” does not simply punish students for their behaviors in order to create docility, it attempts to help students police themselves based on an understanding of social norms. Behavior mapping may be interpreted, by a Foucauldian analysis, as an attempt to increase social adherence by helping students to control their behaviors and their impacts. Teachers frame this strategy, however, as a manifestation of their desire to help their students gain skills and improve their social relations with other members of the community. While Foucault would argue that this is still disciplinary, in that students are social actors who are expected to discipline themselves by adjusting to the norms of their community, the teachers understand this practice as being not strictly about correcting behavior, but also about teaching and learning social knowledge. Behavior mapping is, thus, one site of tension between teachers’ morals and systems of power and control.

Turning then to another kind of therapeutic approach, the example of a student being taken to see a counselor because he was ripping up his worksheet and yelling in class may be examined for aspects of Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurel’s (2012) framework of power. They argue that referrals to medical professionals are attempts to control acts of resistance by individuals with disabilities that are framed as challenging behavior. This particular event may fit within that framework; the student was resisting what he was being told to do (his work), and the paraprofessional viewed this behavior as challenging, and thus sought to control it. She first tried to punish him with a detention, and when that did not work, she sought the help of a specialist. This aligns with Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurel’s framework in many ways, and thus may reveal that such dynamics of power and control are prevalent in the classroom. This situation differs from their framework, however, in that the professional that this student is referred to is a

counselor, not a physician. The counselor's role differs from that of the professionals described in Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut's case study (whose primary role is seen as finding ways to control the aberrant behavior physically, such as by changing the individual's medication) in that counselors' primary role is to provide emotional support. Similar to the behavior mapping strategy described above, counselors' seek to help students understand and manage their emotions. While this management may be seen as a means of control, it is also a part of any individual's well-being, an aspect that is not addressed by Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut.

The act of labeling a behavior as related to a student's disability may parallel Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut's argument, drawing from Goffman, that individuals who are identified as having an intellectual disability are thus labeled as a means of control. When teachers label an action as resulting from disability, however, they do not imply that they want to control that behavior more so than behaviors that do not result from disability. They seem to want to manage all behaviors that are considered inappropriate, but the label only serves to make them more thoughtful in how they approach this management, often leading to emotionally sensitive therapeutic approaches. In fact, when Ms. Daniels claims that there are behaviors that are based on a student's disability that she intentionally allows the student to take part in, she directly contradicts the assertion that a label is only useful as a method of control. While she labels these behaviors, she does not seek to control them, but rather allows the student to behave in a transgressive way because she knows that it is important to the student to feel appreciated.

While teachers' actions in responding to students' behaviors may be interpreted as controlling, disciplinary, and engaging with the webs of power in which students and teachers are located, there are other dimensions to their actions that are not fully theorized by scholars of power. The desire to help students understand their own emotions and those of others may be

viewed as an attempt to help normalize them, and thus a means of managing and controlling their thoughts and actions, but may also be an effort by teachers to help their students become what they see as healthy, well-rounded individuals. This shows that even those with the best intentions can fall into patterns of normalization that align with an ableist system, especially when there are no other established pathways for reacting to students' behaviors. In this way, teachers end up unintentionally acting as agents of Foucauldian discipline, grooming their students into "proper" social actors, which reinforces regimes of normalcy. Power analysis alone, however, does not capture all the dynamics at play in the relationships between these students and their teachers, as it neglects to acknowledge that the teachers' use of Foucauldian discipline comes from a place of caring deeply about their students.

## Chapter 4: The Double-Edged Sword of Rapport

Teachers in this study put time and thought into the relationships they developed with their students. Researchers have studied what contributes to a positive relationship between teachers and students. Interpersonal interactions happen daily in the classroom setting. One study found that in order to develop a positive relationship between teachers and students, teachers should interact with students outside the classroom setting as well. They found that most behavior (53%) that teachers described in positive relationships took place outside of the classroom, in situations such as before or after the lesson, chatting in the hallway, or getting to talk with students on field trips. The topics of these conversations in positive relationships sometimes revolved around classwork, but also include joking around, discussing mutual interests, conversing about life outside of school, or even just greeting one another (Claessens et al. 2017). Positive relationships between teachers and students were characterized by interactions that went beyond the classroom setting and that did not only pertain to classroom life.

Researchers have also found that other types of interactions between teachers and students positively contribute to the teacher-student relationship. One study focused on students with emotional and behavioral disorders, who “present various inappropriate classroom behaviors that present obstacles to their social and academic development,” similar to the students at Scheffield (Sutherland et al. 2000:2). They found that when teachers gave students behavior-specific praise, they were more likely to remain on task with their work. This shows how teacher-student interactions can impact students’ academic performance. Another kind of academically-oriented interaction involves helping students to manage their academic work. Wasburn-Moses (2005:154) found that “62.8% [of special education teachers] stated that they ‘consult with students on [their] caseload’ each day.” Working with students to evaluate their

progress is, therefore, another kind of interaction, that, based on its prevalence, appears to be expected of special education teachers.

These kinds of personal interactions can put a strain on teachers. Hillel Lavian (2015) found that special education teachers experienced emotional fatigue as a result of their intense responsibilities, exemplified by the many tasks described above that they are expected to perform. Hillel Lavian (2015) also points to *role complexity* as a factor that may generate stress for special education teachers. She found that special education teachers are expected to take on multiple roles and tasks, as well as tackle multiple challenges within their classroom related to their students' disabilities, such as having different kinds of disabilities represented in the classroom. According to Hillel Lavian, "role complexity is an inherent part of teaching special education children" (122), meaning that all special education teachers deal with role complexity, regardless of the specific conditions of their job.

While Hillel Lavian's theory of role complexity is generally descriptive of special education teachers' experiences, theories by other scholars regarding special education teachers' roles are typically related specifically to burnout. The two explanatory terms used frequently in burnout literature are role conflict – when an organization's expectations of a teacher's role conflict with their daily work – and role ambiguity – when an organization's expectations for teachers are unclear (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997:330). Crane and Iwanicki (1986) found that both role conflict and role ambiguity were significantly correlated with burnout among special education teachers, primarily because they are not properly supported by their school (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997). While Hillel Lavian does not argue that role complexity necessarily leads to burnout, because of its potential to contribute to role ambiguity and role

conflict (if the complexity of the teachers' roles is not recognized by the administration), it may increase the likelihood of burnout among special education teachers.

## TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Every interaction between a teacher and a student can contribute to their relationship, either in a positive or a negative way. Teachers highly value these relationships and see them as central to their work. Teachers prioritize “rapport” with their students, and see this measure of dynamic as connected to students’ success in the classroom. The strategies that teachers use to build rapport include spending time with their students, praising their students, and working with their students to develop goals for academic success. The importance of rapport to teachers again reveals a tension between teachers genuinely caring about students and teachers wanting positive relationships with students for the sake of increasing their level of control over students.

### *Rapport*

The primary way in which teachers define their relationships with students is through the concept of “rapport.” They often consider building positive rapport as central to their work as a teacher, such as Mr. Clark, who said, “it’s really important, that’s the most important thing for me is good rapport with students and their families,” and Ms. Edwards, who said, “for me personally, as a teacher, ...rapport-building is number one. Building relationships with my students is my strength, it...fuels me each and every day, and that, to me, is the most important thing that I do here.” Both of these teachers see rapport as their top priority, and Ms. Edwards sees building rapport and relationships with her students as the core of the work that she does as a special education teacher.

Teachers mention several factors that may impact their rapport with their students. Some of these factors teachers have less control over, such as how long they have known their students, as Ms. Adams notes when she says, “my class this summer, I’ve known these kids...since they were freshmen, so I feel...like I have a really good rapport with them.” Her good rapport with these students has been developed over time.

Time is also a factor not only with regards how long a teacher has known students, but also how much time they commit to getting to know their students. Ms. Daniels believed that the only reason for her good rapport with students is the time she spends with them:

I think the only reason why I have a lot of good relationships with the population is because I spend so much [time] after [the class] period, like this is our period together, yes, but I spend so much other time with them to get to know them, and [I] have a good rapport, because, you know, I put in the time for it.

She suggests that dedicating time outside of the structured time they have together in class is the only way to develop good rapport with students. Since teachers see rapport as a core part of their job, this means that for some, their job truly extends beyond the classroom to spending time with students outside of class time in order to develop the rapport that is so important to their work.

Rapport is mentioned as important because it can impact other parts of classroom life, such as behavior management. In general, teachers view rapport as being in opposition to rules and standards for behavior. Ms. Adams talked about how she is trying to teach time management as a part of her classroom, and how that can impact rapport:

A lot of times, I can get harder on my students about like, “You’re not here and ready to go” and maybe that can color our relationship, [laughs] ‘cause they don’t really, they don’t like it very much, when you’re more tough, but, yeah, so I’d say we have a good rapport but I can be tough on the higher standards and classroom behavior, especially with those more independent kids.

She suggests that because students do not like teachers who are tough, setting expectations for students may make them like you less. She sees herself as having good rapport with her students,

but qualifies this by saying she is still tough on them in terms of standards for behavior, suggesting that her rapport could be improved only by lowering those expectations. Ms. Adams also directly suggests that positive rapport and rules work against each other, saying, “I would say those two [things] like kind of go in balance... balancing fun, positive rapport and rules, basically.” She believes that while both are necessary for a successful classroom, they do not naturally come together, and teachers must work towards striking a balance of positive rapport and rules so that one is not more dominant than another.

Teachers also link rapport to another aspect of their jobs: teaching academics. Positive rapport can help teachers to make academics more tailored to students, as Mr. Clark explained:

I think I have a pretty good rapport with my students. I try really hard to at least make a connection, learn something about them, that’s actually how I...teach and plan most of my academics, is really kind of student-centered. Really tailor it toward their interests.

Mr. Clark describes his method of developing rapport with his students as making connections and learning things about them. As he establishes these connections, he uses the things he has learned about his students to create curriculum that fits his students.

Rapport is also connected to student motivation. Mr. Clark described how having positive rapport with students helps him to work with them when they face challenges:

‘Cause even if a student... makes a mistake, or if a student, you know, is trying really independently, and everything’s wrong, I think, because of that rapport, of being like, “Wow, you worked really really hard, let’s change some of these things,” they’re more willing to, to change some of their answers, or understand that conceptually they didn’t get it. And instead of shutting down, they’re able to actually keep working through it.

As a result of having developed a relationship with a student that is built around positive rapport, Mr. Clark has an easier time getting a student to work through mistakes. He is able to commend them for their hard work and encourage them to continue to try, preventing them from “shutting down,” an ability which he sees as resulting from the rapport he has already built with his



students. This means that rapport is primary for teachers not only for its own value, but also for how it can affect a student's participation and motivation in the classroom.

Ms. Edwards saw rapport with her students as a way for her to help them develop personally and academically:

I think that students, they do feel that I care, and that they're more receptive and open to feedback that I give them. I have students that come in here who trust me, I guess, and they come in here, they talk to me about things that have nothing to do with, with like math at all, about friendships, so, in the tough times, when I need to be that stern person, or give them some feedback that may not be easy to dish out, I think...it just helps that we have a relationship.

By being there for her students, and developing trust with them, they see that she cares about them as a whole person, and then understand that any harsh feedback comes from a place of caring for them. She does not shy away from being "stern," as other teachers do, but recognizes that it is a part of the job, and also that being stern does not negatively affect her relationship with her students as much if she has already built trust and a positive relationship in other ways.

### *Spending Time*

When it comes to rapport and relationship-building, one of the most frequently-mentioned strategies employed by teachers was spending time with students. For some, this kind of spending time came in the form of informal conversations or hangouts:

I think it's just conversations that you have. Nothing that's forced, you know what I mean, just those natural kind of side conversations. I think setting time for a structured free time, or some structured [time] at the end of class... and then instead of sitting at my computer typing emails or something [laughs], sitting with the students. I think, asking about their weekends, just the natural things that we would do as coworkers, I try to do with the students. And I think that makes them feel more comfortable, and, but...they've also been so respectful with boundaries, so...they treat me as a teacher, but they're willing to open up to me. So, I think that they see that from me asking questions about how they are, and their weekends, knowing their lives, and actually caring about them, [laughs] I think they can see it.

Mr. Clark prefers to get to know his students in a more informal way, just by talking to them to get to know them and learn about their lives. He does, however, try to build time for this into his schedule, to ensure that he has that time with his students. He suggests that some other teachers might not take that time, instead using it for something like emails, but that he sees his relationships with his students as more important. He also recognizes some of the ways that getting to know his students impacts their relationship, much like Ms. Edwards does when she talks about building trust and confidence in her students. He shows his students that he cares about them by getting to know them, and in turn his students show that they trust him by opening up to him. These aspects of trust and care are an important part of relationship building.

Other teachers find that spending time with students is best accomplished in more structured ways, such as through participating in extracurricular activities. Ms. Daniels attributed her relationships with her students to the time she spends with them outside of class:

I do a lot of things outside of the classroom because I want to know them on a, on a better plane. So, I pretty much volunteer for like, [laughing] literally everything. I do the talent show, I stage crew the play, I coach basketball, I assistant teach Zumba, like... any afterschool thing we have, I pretty much do. Um, to the point where they're like, "You don't have to do this much!" But, I do.... It's really just to be everything that they need, and really know them. I think the only reason why I have a lot of good relationships with the population is because I spend so much...other time with them to get to know them, and [I] have a good rapport, because, you know, I put in the time for it.

Like Mr. Clark, Ms. Daniels believes that time is a key component of relationship-building, attributing her positive rapport to spending time with students. Rather than building time into her class period to spend getting to know her students, the way Mr. Clark does, Ms. Daniels dedicates her time outside the classroom to her students. While she says there are people – perhaps in the administration – who tell her that she does not have to do all these activities, she also believes that she has better relationships than other teachers with her students because she spends so much time with them.

Ms. Adams agreed with Ms. Daniels that time spent outside the classroom is important to building relationships with students, but also acknowledged the limits of this for teachers, especially as they get further into their career:

The other piece would just be spending time outside [of class], the only steps you need to do are like, go ahead and do it, like coach the basketball team, or sign up for trips and that kind of stuff. I think it's really important, [but] I think one of the problems is that, the older you get as a teacher and the more burnt-out you get, the less likely you are to do that, and I think it makes your relationship suffer; if you're feeling burnt-out and you don't want to do basketball, you know, you're gonna miss out on that time.

Ms. Adams suggests that as teachers burn out, they are less likely to commit time to after-school activities and that as this occurs, their relationships with their students “suffer.” This claim has implications for all teachers, as teachers who do not dedicate time to extracurricular activities, regardless of whether that is from burnout or other reasons, will have worse relationships with their students. This means that they must volunteer their extra time in order to have good relationships with their students, which teachers link to academic motivation and success. The consensus seems to be that teaching students is not enough, but that time must be dedicated to getting to know students, and according to some, this must be extra time outside the classroom.

### *Praise*

One strategy that teachers use within the classroom to promote student learning is praise.

Ms. Edwards described praise as a very common occurrence in her classroom:

I give them verbal praise, pats on the back, like literal pats on the back, thumbs up, but I'm extremely over-the-top with the praise, I lay it on thick. It's genuine, but I do lay it on thick, so that...it translates to them. But yeah, constant praise, constant positive reinforcement.

She describes her praise as both “genuine” and “over-the-top,” which for her means that she believes that they deserve praise and positive reinforcement, and wants to be sure that when she gives that praise, it is recognized as such without a doubt.

While teachers see giving praise to students as important, they do not do so gratuitously.

Ms. Adams explained how praise impacts students' motivation and teacher-student relationships:

They love...being praised, you can see a big difference in terms of motivation and how well they work towards their goals, so I think that it is so important.... For example, this summer class, they really thrive off of positive reinforcement through shout-outs, and it would really impact your relationship, like when you give them a shout-out it's tangible how excited they are and how it impacts your relationship for the better.

Shout-outs were mentioned by every teacher except one as a method they used to praise their students. Shout-outs are essentially a way of recognizing when a student has done something good, but in a tangible way, such as giving them a piece of paper with the shout-out written on it, a sticker, or a bracelet. During the year, these were done in classrooms, and during the summer, shout-outs were given out every week during the all-school community assembly. Ms. Adams mentions shout-outs as an example, but also notes that any form of praise impacts student motivation. For her, praising her students is important because it makes them more motivated to accomplish the goals that they have set, while also improving their relationship with the teacher who gave them the shout-out. Praise, therefore, is not given out without reason, but is a way for teachers to improve their relationships with students and students' motivation in the classroom.

I witnessed shout-outs being used as a motivational tool even if the teacher was not actually giving them. One teacher used shout-outs in her classroom during the year, but did not give them out during the summer, except at community assembly. When this teacher saw a student using her finger to follow along with words on a piece of paper, she told her, "Wow, good job, following along! That's awesome! I would give you a shout-out if this was during the year." This piece of praise tried to provide the same level of support and motivation that a shout-out would give. In this way, the teacher was able to praise the student heavily and motivate her to use the strategy of following along again, without the use of physical reinforcers.

I often witnessed teachers use praise to reward student behavior in a way that may have subsequently impacted students' motivation to continue those positive behaviors. For example, when a student was complaining that her work was too hard, a teacher encouraged her, to which she responded, "Okay, I'll try." The teacher followed up by praising her, saying, "Good job! I like that. Trying is good." This praise frames trying as a positive behavior, thus motivating the student to continue to try. This teacher similarly praised a student for volunteering to give a presentation, saying, "Good job being brave." This not only praised the individual student, but also encouraged all the other students who were not volunteering to "be brave" and participate in class. This motivates the entire class, as they could expect to be praised if they were to volunteer.

### *Collaborative Goal-Setting*

A few teachers mentioned working with students to set goals for what the students wanted to accomplish. This process of setting goals together was connected to other aspects of classroom life, such as motivation and teacher-student relationships. Ms. Adams, who teaches Adaptive Skills during the school year, observed how goal-setting impacted her classroom:

I also would say that working with them to create goals – at least in the Adaptive Skills setting – for independence, it can be tough at first or [students can be] a little reluctant to talk to you about what their goals are for independence, but once you show that you're working on it with them... I guess I'm talking more about [the two most independent cohorts], but ... your relationship changes for the better when you're working for a goal together, as opposed to the teacher telling them, "Now we're doing this, and now we're doing that." That was one of the more successful parts of teaching Adaptive Skills is like, you set a goal that you want to be able to do by yourself and we're gonna work towards it, as opposed to me telling you what you need to do.

Ms. Adams advocates for working with students to create goals for independence, rather than imposing goals on them. She sees this type of collaboration as beneficial to the relationship between a student and their teacher. She also describes setting goals together as a successful aspect of her teaching, implying that it may have improved student engagement or achievement.

Ms. Daniels also emphasized the importance of setting goals with her students:

So last year, I would like email with my advisory, and say, “Hey, do you wanna meet? You wanna look at your goals?” And then I would have one-on-one time with them, just like you would have with like, a boss or a mentor, and, yeah, and I would talk to them through that, you know, be able to, again, build that rapport with them and, you know, praise them in that way.

She saw herself as a mentor to her students, one who could talk through students’ goals with them and help them accomplish them. This was one of the ways in which she was able to build rapport; it is a particular kind of spending time together in which the teacher and the student specifically work together on goals. She also connects goal-setting to praise, in that she is able to praise students for achieving goals once they have set them. For Ms. Daniels, goal setting is an important step in students being able to succeed in the classroom, as well as for her to be able to praise her students and improve her relationship with them in that way.

## ANALYSIS

Teachers’ heavy focus on rapport aligns with findings about positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers valued spending time with students, joking with them, bonding with them over mutual interests, and spending time with them outside the classroom setting, all of which were found to be indicators of a positive teacher-student relationship by Claessens et al. (2017). This means that empirical research aligns with teachers’ priorities for interactions with their students, suggesting that research can successfully recommend practices for teachers. It also means that teachers at Scheffield are successfully creating positive teacher-student relationships, at least according to this study. The reasons behind the creation of these positive relationships, however, may be contested when issues of power and control are brought into the discussion.

Research also confirms the Scheffield teachers’ perspective that improved relationships with students can benefit students’ academic performance. Both teachers and researchers

recognize the importance of praise. Teacher's perceptions that praise motivates their students are reflected in Sutherland et al.'s (2000) findings that behavior-specific praise keeps students on-task. The teachers I interviewed felt that praising students made them work harder towards their goals, which would require remaining on-task to accomplish. This could, however, also be seen as a form of control; praising students rewards them for behaving within the teacher's desired boundaries. This reveals more tension between the perspectives that teachers care about their students, in that they want them to be academically successful, and that teachers want to discipline students into performing in particular ways.

One important task to the teachers in this study was setting goals with students. While Wasburn-Moses (2005) also found that special education teachers frequently consulted with their students about their work, it was considered one task of many that special education teachers are expected to complete, and she did not research the impact of such consultation on teachers or students. The teachers in this study provide a potential framework for understanding the impact that collaboration on goal-setting between teachers and students may have, which includes improved academic engagement, academic success, and rapport between teachers and students.

What teachers in this study do not address as much as researchers do is the issue of burnout. The teachers represented here emphasize that they make a concerted effort to dedicate a lot of their time to and invest deeply in their students, all of which may contribute to emotional fatigue and role complexity (Hillel Lavian 2015). Despite the potential impact that these commitments may have on teachers, only one teacher interviewed mentioned burnout. Ms. Adams says that as teachers become more burned out, they may start to spend less time with students, and spending less time with students may ultimately hurt a teacher's relationships with them. While Ms. Adams does not specify what could be the cause of teacher burnout among

special education teachers, somewhat implied in her statement is that the amount of time spent with students is what could cause burnout. This issue of spending time with students outside the classroom does not align with the literature on special education teacher burnout, which stresses role ambiguity and role conflict as the sources of teacher burnout (Crane and Iwanicki 1986; Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997). Teachers in this study do not mention any malalignment between the expectations of the school and the teacher's roles; if anything, they perceive that the administration expects them to do less than they actually do. This finding may suggest that teachers in a self-contained school specifically for students with disabilities may experience less role conflict and ambiguity, and thus may be at a lower risk for burnout.

As far as research is concerned, Scheffield teachers seem to do everything right when it comes to teacher-student relationships. They spend time with students outside the classroom, praise their students and set goals with them to improve their academic performance, and seem to feel that their work aligns with the school's organizational structure, eliminating burnout concerns. Teachers repeatedly express that getting to know their students is their top priority and that they want their students to trust them, suggesting that they truly care about their students as whole people. The amount of time that teachers choose to dedicate to their students, despite the risk of burnout, is some of the best evidence that this care is genuine. Their heavy investment in developing rapport suggests that it is important to them that they have good relationships with students. Simultaneously, however, teachers are able to leverage this rapport to elicit certain effects in the classroom. This raises questions about whether they seek rapport for its own sake, or if it benefits them by helping them to exert control over their students – and perhaps these are not mutually exclusive. This tension may relate to what other scholars have discovered about special educators' careers, but it has not yet been fully incorporated into the literature.



## Chapter 5: The Road to Independence Is Paved with Normalcy

One of the major tenets of Scheffield's work is that they seek to help their students achieve independent living. For some students, complete independence will not be possible, as they will require additional supports throughout their life due to their needs, but Scheffield seeks to help all their students live as independently as possible. Students with autism may face challenges in independent living due to many factors associated with their disability, including social, communicative, and cognitive differences (Hume et al. 2014). This can include difficulty in learning adaptive skills, or skills necessary for independent living. Studies have found that after individuals with autism have completed secondary education, upwards of 50% have independence outcomes that are rated as "poor" (Eaves and Ho 2008; Howlin, Magiati, and Charman 2004). Because of this reality that students with autism struggle to live independently after secondary education, teaching skills that promote independent living is an important goal for Scheffield and the teachers who work within it.

One way of measuring independence is financial independence. The ability to provide for oneself by working for a consistent income is one of the most important components to financial independence. People with disabilities, including autism and intellectual disabilities, may have difficulty finding and keeping a job, as jobs may not accommodate their needs. Additionally, changes in the economy may further decrease people with disabilities' ability to find work. Globalization has created a shift from an industrialized economy to a service and information economy (Dowse 2009). This shift has impacted people with disabilities who may have been able to maintain a manual labor job, but who are "less likely to possess the social and cognitive skills required for employment in the new service and information economy" (Dowse 2009:573). Consider individuals with autism, whose deficits in social and communication skills may hinder

them in working at a service sector job. These changes create new challenges for special education schools and teachers in helping students with disabilities to become independent.

With an increasingly complex context in which to develop independence in their students, and independence being a central, but not exclusive, goal of special education, scholars have offered frameworks that outline the purposes of education for learners with intellectual disabilities and autism. Black and Lawson (2017) theorized that the three purposes of special education, specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, are: person-becoming, later life/vocation, and citizenship. While later life/vocation has been my focus in this section so far, the development of a sense of self that is described by person-becoming and the participation in society captured by citizenship are also important aspects of independence and living a healthy and fulfilling life. In fact, Black and Lawson argue that “these purposes of education are particularly difficult to disentangle” (220), which points to the notion that special education may be trying to accomplish some combination of all of these in everything that is taught.

Additionally, Black and Lawson recognize that “vocational learning is afforded a much wider interpretation as preparation for adult life and independence more generally, with preparation for employment as relevant to only some learners” (220). This means that a narrow focus on just occupational skills will not be sufficient for all special education students, and instead special education should include teaching such concepts as adaptive skills, to help students live as independently as possible, no matter their occupational status or general level of independence.

## ACADEMICS

Academics at Scheffield differ from a general education curriculum, which the teachers frame as a unique aspect of teaching special education. What special education teachers include in their curriculum directly relates to what they expect their students to experience in the future.

Their desire to help their students live independently after school drives them to teach certain content and in a particular way, which may ultimately end up reifying norms for their students.

### *Above and Beyond*

Teachers often expressed to me a sense that they were going above and beyond their duty as a teacher. They seemed to believe that the job of a teacher, or most teachers, was strictly to teach academics, and that they did more than that by teaching social and behavioral skills as well. Ms. Adams showed how this belief is directly related to the fact that she teaches special education instead of general education:

Like, my math teacher didn't teach me social behavior, but I feel like as a special ed teacher, all of my actions need to reflect social behavior and helping our students think about those things, not just math, or something like that.

This quote exemplifies an assumption running through many of the teachers' comments, which is that in general education, a math teacher teaches "just math." She sees herself as teaching not only the academic content of her subject area, but also going beyond content by teaching social behavior. She suggests that she teaches social behavior both implicitly, through modeling, and explicitly, by discussing it with her students to help them think about their own social behavior.

Modeling was mentioned by multiple teachers as an important way to teach students appropriate social behavior. Teachers saw their behavior as the standard in the classroom, and so they felt obligated to model behaviors that they wanted their students to learn. Ms. Brown echoed Ms. Adams' sentiment that teachers' actions teach their students about social interaction:

I think it's just important to remember as a teacher, it's not only the academics, but also, just every teachable moment, so it's just like, you as a model and how you teach other people, treat other people, so even how we treat our paras is, you know, very important, because, you know, the students, even though they don't comment on it, they're definitely observing every single thing you do. So it's just important, even how you deal with problematic behavior in the classroom, you know, ...what's appropriate and not appropriate, [the] way that you deal with it.

Ms. Brown did not make the distinction that Ms. Adams did, which is that this is only an aspect of the job of a special education teacher. By saying “as a teacher,” she may see this as a part of the job of all teachers. However, some of what she discusses seems to be related to her students’ disabilities, such as demarcating what is appropriate and inappropriate. Understanding what is appropriate and inappropriate is a skill that people with autism often struggle with (Loveland et al. 2001; Nah and Poon 2011). While it is unclear whether Ms. Brown is speaking only about teaching special education, she does make it clear that her job is to teach beyond academics. She sees modeling as a key way of implicitly teaching students about social behavior.

Ms. Brown believes that it is her responsibility to teach social skills as a part of her role as a special education teacher. Mr. Clark echoed this sentiment, as he also saw going above and beyond academics a responsibility of his job as a math teacher at the school:

Sometimes I feel like I’m teaching more social behavior, or just as much social behaviors as math. ... Yeah, I think it’s part of the job. I think...you’re like a counselor, you teach those social skills, you teach academics. Yeah, I think it’s important because it’s part of the whole student learning, you know...it’s not my job to just teach you math. I’m gonna help you become a better you.

He perceives his job as not just about teaching content, but teaching social skills, as well as acting as student support, which he implied when he invoked the role of counselor as a part of his job as a classroom teacher. He perceives student learning as holistic, involving not just his particular academic area, but learning about other parts of life as well. He believes that doing all these things as a special education teacher makes his students “better” versions of themselves.

### *Social Behavior*

When teachers talk about going above and beyond, they often explicitly mention teaching social skills or social behavior. Ms. Adams explained how this is particularly relevant in this

school, because it is a self-contained setting where all students have disabilities, in contrast to an inclusion setting where students with disabilities would be integrated with neurotypical students:

If they don't have any typical social behaviors to...learn from, or [to use] as an example because they're not in an inclusion classroom so there's no typical students to learn from their behavior, that means that I'm the only person who's enforcing those social rules that we have. I always use this example, but if you're telling me the same joke over and over, my first instinct is to be like, "Ha ha, that's so cute," and continue that play with you, but if I'm the only social behavior norm in the room, then I have to be like, "Actually, I don't think that's funny and it's making me feel, whatever, uncomfortable or annoyed."

Ms. Adams suggests that in general education classrooms, students can learn "typical" behaviors from their peers, but that the students here are unable to model that for each other because none of them perform "typical" behaviors. She sees it as her responsibility, as the only person in the room who understands norms of behavior, to enforce norms of behavior on her students, even if she does not necessarily want to. She suggests that she sometimes finds behaviors that are not considered "typical" to be "cute," implying that they do not actually bother her. When she models for me how she would describe to a student how those behaviors make her feel, her use of the word "whatever" before saying emotions she might feel suggests that she does not actually feel those things, but is trying to approximate how they might make someone else feel. This scenario suggests that her primary goal in teaching social behavior is to get her students to understand societal norms, and that enforcing these norms is a key part of her job.

Mr. Clark also talked about how his job involves changing students' social behaviors, and how he sees that as an important part of both their lives and his. He talked about his experiences working with students who had behaviors that were difficult or not typical, saying, "Once I started working with some students with, [difficult] behaviors, just seeing those behaviors, extinguished...I was like, 'Oh, this is so wild.' I really feel like I helped someone." He sees his part in extinguishing atypical behaviors from a student, thus bringing them closer to the norm, as

making a difference in their life and helping them. Much like he says that he wants to make them “a better you,” he sees a large part of his work as improving his students as people. For him, this includes ridding them of behaviors that may be difficult for other people to deal with. While these teacher see teaching social behavior as a key part of their job, it often means teaching students to understand “typical” behavior and how to behave within these conscribed norms.

### *Adaptive Skills*

One of the other ways in which special education teachers differentiated themselves from general education teachers is that they see themselves as teaching a functional curriculum, that provides what the school refers to as “adaptive skills,” or life skills. Mr. Clark discussed how his approach to teaching aims to provide his students with adaptive skills:

I’m a math teacher, ...so I hope that I am able to teach them functional life skills that they do use in the community, and that they do use at home. Yeah, I try to make sure that my curriculum is at least functional enough that they will use it, you know, and [have it] be reinforced by real-life things.

From his perspective, his role as a math teacher is to teach a curriculum that is connected to “real life,” rather than being strictly academic. This is related to the idea that what the school is preparing its students for is independent living; even academic subjects like math are geared towards giving students the skills they need to function at home and in the community.

In the classroom I worked in, adaptive skills were woven in to assignments, and, notably, this was done more prominently in the less independent cohorts. In the “Diversity” unit, each cohort created final projects based on the topic they were studying: In LC3 (the most independent cohort), they studied diversity in comic books, in LC2 they studied diversity in New York City, and in LC1 (the least independent cohort) they studied biodiversity. LC3’s final project was to create a video about a comic character who is diverse, and there were no adaptive

skills interwoven in this project. LC2's final project was to create a presentation about a New York City neighborhood, and as a part of this project, they found out which subway and bus lines went to that neighborhood and which stops were within the neighborhood. This is an aspect of travel training, an adaptive skill that teachers commonly referred to. The LC1 students created presentations about a particular ecosystem, describing animals that lived there and what the climate was like. As a part of this, they had to list three things that they would bring with them if they were to travel to that ecosystem (e.g.: a bathing suit to the ocean), as well as three rules of travel safety they would follow while getting there. These adaptive skills components became a greater part of the academic curriculum as the cohort's level of independence decreased.

Teachers also expressed ways that they taught adaptive skills not strictly through their curriculum, but also through their rules, standards, and teaching practices. Ms. Adams discussed how some of the rules she sets are designed to help students learn life skills that she explicitly connects to their future as a member of the workforce:

Time management's a huge thing that we're learning, so you have to be in the class on time. And so a lot of times, I can get harder on my students about like, "You're not here and ready to go"...Especially as they work towards getting a job and stuff, there's certain things that you want to create in your classroom that they might see in the real world.

While Ms. Adams frames time management as an issue of "standards" and "classroom behavior," she also sees it as a functional life skill that she wants to instill in her students. She echoes Mr. Clark's notion of adaptive skills being something their students need for "the real world." For her, this "real world" that holds her students' future is one in which they are working, or trying to work, at a job. Functional life skills, then, are not just about being able to live at home or be in the community, but also to engage in the workforce.

## STUDENTS' FUTURES

The teachers taught concepts in their classes with an eye towards how students will apply them in “the real world,” or the imagined world that students will enter after graduating from Scheffield. Teachers often either discussed or hinted at their visions for their students’ futures, as well as considered how their teaching would impact those futures. The three primary components that described students’ futures were that they wanted their students to live as independently as possible, they believed they would at least try to get a job and definitely would not go to college, and they feared that their students would face marginalization in their everyday lives.

### *Independent Living*

A major goal for teachers was to help their students prepare to live independently. This resonates with the school’s mission statement as it is written on their website, which declares that the school “envision[s] a world in which all people with special needs are included as valued members of their communities, leading independent and purposeful lives.” One of the major components then, of the school’s mission, is helping students towards being less dependent on others. This was reflected in teachers’ comments about their students, in which groups of students were often described as more or less independent. Ms. Adams clearly saw students’ level of independence in terms of their disability as connected to their ability to be independent in the future, saying “for those, our more independent students...it’s high-risk, because if they can get these adaptive skills, they could get a job, and potentially not live independently completely, but, get on their way to living independently.” The connection between the school’s academics and the students’ future is made very clear here. Ms. Adams sees adaptive skills as essential to students being able to live independently. At the same time, total independence is not expected for all, or even most students, but is considered a possibility only for those considered “more independent,” which is a designation related to student’s cognitive functioning.



Ms. Adams is, during the year, an Adaptive Skills teacher. She describes some examples of units that she teaches as “travel training,” “cooking, grocery store, clothing management,” and “purchasing.” While these are her main academic focus, other teachers incorporate some of these units into their other academic subjects as well. Mr. Clark, a math teacher, described how he incorporates life skills into his classroom to help prepare students for independent living:

I mean, for example, [in] math, this doesn’t happen with every school, but [in] math class, ...we teach them money, we teach them how to use numbers, you know, we can do, we do this for an entire year, and students can still have a tough time. Or, or maybe they get it, but the second that we like, “We’re going to Dunkin’ Donuts!” they really are using those skills. Not every school’s going to Dunkin’ Donuts for math class, but I’m able to see them use the skills that we’ve taught them all year, and in an actual, real-life setting. So...maybe you understand the numbers, that’s so good, but...you didn’t give the right change, or like, you walked away – those social skills [matter] too, to be like, you didn’t wait for your change, you just like walked away.

In this example, Mr. Clark fuses the academic component of being able to do math with the social component of remembering to wait for your change. A student needs both of these skills in order to make a purchase independently. This is why teachers view functional life skills as a vital part of what they do; if their students are to live independently, they need to be able to do such tasks as making a purchase on their own, and all of the teachers work to ensure that these skills are being learned, even if they teach academic subjects other than Adaptive Skills.

These functional academics are sometimes placed in contrast to other kinds of academic content. Ms. Brown explained some of the tensions within the school of what the academic focus should be, suggesting that her priority is functional academics:

Are we focusing on like academics here, [or] are we focusing on adaptive skills? There are some people in this school that say they should be exposed to like – so I’m an ELA teacher – they should be exposed to like, Shakespeare and stuff in here in the classroom, but some of our students can’t read, so is that really practical? Or should they be exposed to just, you know, menus, something that is more obtainable, that is actually more important, I think.

Ms. Brown puts an emphasis on the practicality of what she teaches. In the end, she believes that skills like being able to read a menu are not only more important for a student to be able to live independently, but are also more relevant and attainable for her students. While she wants to provide a quality education for her students, she believes that this should take the form of helping them to achieve skills that will prepare them for a life that they can live independently.

### *Working, Not College*

A large part of teachers' visions for the futures of their students were centered around working. Teachers emphasized that students need skills that can help them get and maintain a job. This is grounded in the school's structure; during the year, students participate in internships where they get job experience, and during the summer they have VCI once a week, where they study different kinds of jobs, such as retail and food service. In interviews, teachers repeatedly mentioned how the work they did prepared students to hold jobs.

Teachers sometimes seemed to believe that the only skills worth cultivating were ones that prepared their children for working, often in contrast to what parents believed. In talking about a situation in which parents were pressuring a particular teacher, Ms. Brown said, "I know the math teacher had an issue 'cause...one of the kids is really good at multiplying and stuff, but, I don't know if that's applicable, 'cause what kind of job are you gonna have where you don't, you can't use a calculator, you know?" In this situation, the parents wanted the math teacher to focus more on allowing their child to make use of and demonstrate their skills of multiplication, but the teachers did not view that as an "applicable" skill. A skill is valuable, to Ms. Brown and the math teacher she references, only to the extent that a student could use it in a job. Other skills are considered less practical, and are therefore not worth cultivating.

Teachers also tried to develop an atmosphere in their classrooms that they felt would reflect the conditions of a work environment. Mr. Clark described how he did this in relation to celebrating student success in his classroom:

I don't use too many like actual physical reinforcers.... I'd say that most[ly], it's just praise. Otherwise, [laughs] not much. Which sounds so bad, but...I try to tie it to the real world, and you don't get praised too much, like we don't get [praised] too much, like [if] we're doing a good job at work, it's not like you get like *something*. So, but, if someone tells you like, "You did a good job at work," it makes you feel good, so I try to at least do that, to be like, "I see that you worked really hard on this, you did a good job."

Mr. Clark compares the way he treats his students to the way he sees himself treated as an employee. He refrains from giving physical rewards to his students because they would not get them in a work environment, but he still wants his students to feel supported, so he gives them the kind of verbal feedback that he sees as appropriate in his work environment.

While most teachers implicitly talked about their students joining the workforce after graduation, there were occasional explicit comments made about students not attending college. Ms. Adams, the Adaptive Skills teacher, said that "we talk a lot in Adaptive Skills about like, okay, you're not going to college, college is not the track for you, but what are the other tracks?" It is implied that these "other tracks" mean getting a job. Moreover, without a college degree, the type of job that they will be able to acquire is likely limited. This is also reflected in the kinds of work that students study in VCI; relatively low-paying jobs in retail or food service are the kinds of jobs that the school is expecting and preparing students to go into.

Interestingly, Ms. Adams followed up her comment about her students not going to college with one that suggested that not all of the authority figures in the students' lives agree about what their future holds. After saying that they talk with students in Adaptive Skills about not going to college, she said, "And we worry about parents being like, 'Why did you tell my student they can't go to college?'" This means that while teachers may have a particular vision

for their students' future, upheld by the school's mission and institutions, parents may not share in that vision, and may hope for a different future for their child. What the school provides for their child, however, is a relatively narrow path to follow: one in which they do not go to college and begin working.

### *Societal Marginalization*

While teachers expressed optimism that their students would be able to find jobs and live independent lives, they also expressed worries that students would continue to face marginalization and barriers to success because of their disabilities. Ms. Daniels got very emotional while talking about this aspect of her students' future:

I think, I wonder, sometimes...what's gonna happen when they're older, is mostly what I think about. I think, you know, that's... [tearing up] yeah, no, it makes me upset. [laughs] Yeah, I think about what they're gonna do, 'cause I know the reality, and...it's not a very... I don't think society has really created a place for these children, or find value in them, and when you work with people who are not valued by society, it's like, they don't have many options. So, I think we try and best prepare them here, but I also realize that this is an isolated and closed environment, and a lot of them are not gonna be able to do all these wonderful things that they get to do here. So, I think that's a challenge, is you worry about [laughs] what their future looks like.

Looking at what teachers have said about the work they do with their students in light of this comment, it becomes clear that what they believe they are doing is protecting students from marginalization. Ms. Daniels frames the way in which the school aims to "best prepare" students, by conveying practical skills upon them, as an effort to help them find a place in a society that does not value them. She acknowledges, however, that even this may not be enough, and that the marginalization that students face outside the school may limit their accomplishments. The emotion with which Ms. Daniels talked about the way society treats her students makes it clear that the teachers believe they are working their students' best interest, and that it comes from caring deeply about them and wanting to help them succeed in the face of marginalization.

Some teachers also expressed a desire to provide students with additional skills to help them navigate a world that is not built for them and does not value them. Ms. Adams noted how she sees the school falling short in terms of teaching students to advocate for themselves:

We have a class [at the school] called Self-Advocacy where students learn about their disability, and own what they need and like practice asking for what they need. But I would say...the learning there kind of stops, and what I would prefer and hope for is that all of our school would be much more integrated into that self-advocacy conversation.

She sees the skills taught in Self-Advocacy as valuable, because with those skills, students become able to acquire the support they need independently. She went on to say that she wants to incorporate self-advocacy more into her own teaching, saying, “my hope would be that my classroom would foster values of like, you have a disability, let’s learn to advocate for yourself and learn how to overcome certain things, basically like, disability pride.” For her, notions of pride in one’s disability are tied up in self-advocacy, but these are also skills that can help students “overcome” barriers. Teachers believe that in order for students to succeed in a society that seeks to prevent them from doing so, they should be learning skills that help them advocate for the support they need. This turns the marginalization these students face into somewhat of an individual problem, wherein the solution is for the student to advocate for themselves to receive support, rather than locating the solution in advocacy that seeks to change social structures. The language of “overcoming” suggests that students should be working around barriers, rather than students (and those who care for them) working to tear barriers down. The other skills that teachers have mentioned teaching their students, such as normative social skills, also stem from this goal of being accepted into society. Through a combination of normative behaviors that make them more palatable, and being the ones to advocate for themselves, teachers believe that they are best preparing their students to live independently in a society that makes that an incredibly difficult goal to accomplish.

## ANALYSIS

The paradox of academics and students futures is the again reveals a tension between care and control. Teachers care about their students and want them to have happy, fulfilling lives. Teachers believe that students' only chance for such a future is independence. Students must be able to behave normatively if they are to become independent. These are the tenets that uphold the purposes of special education, and that lead teachers to develop a curriculum that focuses on normative social and behavioral skills as a tool to combat students' own marginalization.

Teachers' perspectives on the academic priorities they hold for their students reflect their beliefs in the purposes of special education. Teachers believe students need to learn the concepts they teach, even if they are not considered "academic" in the traditional sense. Teachers' perspective that they are going "above and beyond" for their students suggests that they believe that the purposes of special education differ from the presumably purely academic purposes of general education. While it has been argued that general education is not purely academic in purpose either (see Labaree 1997), the teachers in this study make a distinction between what they and general education teachers teach in that special education teachers see themselves as teaching more content that is not typically considered academic. The ways special education teachers discuss academics fit with Black and Lawson's (2017) framework of the three purposes of special education. Black and Lawson propose that the three purposes of special education are person-becoming, later life/vocation, and citizenship, and that all three of these are intertwined, which resonates with Scheffield teachers' perspectives on academics.

The teaching of social behavior involves teaching students normative social skills, which can be considered a part of person-becoming, later life/vocation, and citizenship (Black and Lawson 2017). Social skills are a key part of person-becoming, as they can help individuals to

develop interpersonal relationships that are a part of a fulfilling life. They also can contribute to an individual's ability to take part in a vocation, especially in an increasingly service-based economy (Dowse 2009). Additionally, normative social behavior is, in an ableist society, a prerequisite in many ways for citizenship; in order to be considered deserving of social citizenship, individuals must follow behavioral norms. Because meeting certain normative standards is required for citizenship, teachers believe that students learning social behavior skills will help to protect them from the societal marginalization that teachers envisioned their students facing. Here, the tension between care and control is clearly situated within the larger social context; teachers want to protect their students from marginalization within society, and so they employ teaching strategies that seek to keep students within certain boundaries of appropriate behavior.

Adaptive skills are also taught to promote multiple purposes of education. Teachers put a heavy emphasis on adaptive skills as necessary for later life and vocation. Adaptive skills are recognized as a key component to independence, no matter what a student's future may look like. While special education teachers do not envision every student holding a job after completing their education, they still consider adaptive skills a necessary part of the curriculum for all special education students. This resonates with Black and Lawson's argument that "vocational learning is afforded a much wider interpretation as preparation for adult life and independence more generally" (220), as adaptive skills are not only for students who will hold jobs, but they are important for any student to have a more independent future. Adaptive skills are also incorporated into notions of citizenship. Individuals with disabilities who cannot feed or clothe themselves, travel safely, or make purchases on their own are considered dependent on others, which causes them to be viewed as less than full citizens.

The quest for citizenship and independence for students with disabilities leads special education teachers to focus heavily on teaching social norms as curriculum. Their purposes are morally grounded; they want to help prepare students to be viewed as complete citizens by the rest of society, so that students can live happy, fulfilled lives. In order to foster independence, however, teachers have to cultivate the kinds of skills that are required in the job market, in economic transactions, and in social interactions with fellow citizens. The ability to complete these tasks requires an internalization of the normative behavioral patterns that allow these interactions to take place. Teachers' deep desire to help their students, which they believe preparing them for independence does, causes them to follow the only channels through which they know how to cultivate success, namely by teaching students to conform to social norms.

Ultimately, teachers' visions for their students' futures and the academics that they teach both result from the societal context in which special education teachers and their students are situated. Teachers envision few of their students going to college or holding jobs because higher education and most vocations are inaccessible for individuals with disabilities. Although critical disability studies imagines a world in which more parts of society are available to all individuals with disabilities, special education teachers are working within the present system, trying to ensure that their students can have the best life that is currently obtainable. Society may or may not eventually change to become more accessible, but in the meantime, these students will finish school in the next few years, and will need to have skills to help them be more autonomous. While the purposes of special education may not be as expansive as advocates for people with disabilities would like, they reflect the realities that young adults with disabilities are facing.



## Chapter 6: In the Battle Between Care and Control, Who Really Wins?

The moral perspectives put forth by critical disabilities studies come into conflict, at times, with the practices of teachers. My findings show that the everyday experiences of teachers, as well as the outcomes they hope to help their students achieve within the constraints of an ableist society, lead them to adopt practices that do not always consider the broader implications of disability theory. In particular, teachers frequently seek to normalize students, although that is not their explicit intention. In their daily work with students, teachers want to keep students on task, develop relationships with their students, and prepare them for the lives they will be facing when they finish school. They are more preoccupied with these day-to-day tasks than they are with deconstructing the ableism of society because they see the immediate impacts that their work can have on their students. While special education teachers do desire a world that better understands their students, they also are practitioners who, in the absence of large-scale structural change, want to do what they can to improve their students' quality of life.

Looking at behavior management from a theoretical and a practical standpoint, different priorities emerge. The scholarly writing on behavior management focuses on power relations between teachers and students and how teachers enforce these dynamics. Teachers, however, consider a few factors in developing their behavior management strategies. First, they must consider what is disruptive to a classroom setting, thus impeding their ability to do their job. Then, they seek to determine what a student's reasons are for misbehaving. Finally, they strive to help their students perform the social and emotional work that can be done as a form of behavior management. Practitioners, therefore, are focused on issues that sociologists are not. They are concerned about their ability to perform their job, because if a student is disrupting their class, they are unable to work with the other students, which is their primary purpose. Additionally,

they are concerned about the emotional well-being of their students, as well as their students' ability to understand social situations in terms of their own emotions and those of others.

Teachers' focus on immediate classroom concerns does not diminish the importance of power analysis; it is crucial that teachers understand how their actions have the ability to limit their students' agency and to have significant impacts on students' self-image and world view, among other potential consequences. It does not seem, however, that teachers think much about power in their everyday interactions, even if it may be something they consider in the context of their personal ethics.

Teachers' priorities with regards to their relationships with their students reveal an emphasis on rapport that has important moral implications. Special education teachers' roles are certainly complex, as Hillel Lavian (2015) suggests with her theory of role complexity. Hillel Lavian, however, implies that teachers experience role complexity because they are expected to take on many different tasks. The ways in which rapport and classroom control are linked, however, suggest a different kind of complexity. This moral tension between teachers wanting to create rapport with students because they care about them and teachers desiring good rapport for the sake of increasing their ability to manage and control students is a complexity to the task of teaching special education that has not yet been fully explored. My findings suggest that Hillel Lavian's theory of role complexity, and other work that centers on the role of special educators, could be expanded to include moral tensions and ethical conflicts that exist within special education teachers' line of work. This study is one entrée into this exploration of the complex morality framework that special education teachers operate within.

The ways teachers use academics to prepare their students for the future again reveals a significant conflict between critical disability studies and the everyday realities of teachers.

Teachers are operating from a practical perspective, one in which they want to help their students navigate everyday experiences and prepare them to do so independently. Theorists are operating from a sociological perspective, one which sees the structures that these students are embedded in and advocates for changes to these systems. Teachers see the short-term, the lives that people with disabilities are immediately living; critical disability studies advocates see the long-term, the world that people with disabilities could live in. Teachers are staking a moral claim to helping students. They see their work as morally just because these students will face greater difficulties navigating the world without these teachers' interventions. Ultimately, however, this work need only exist so long as there are still ableist structures in place. If our society is capable of immense change, then, someday, we will have no need for special education, at least in the sense it is used for the students in this study. In the meantime, however, these students will continue to live and exist in a world that is not built for them.

Special education teachers are, by and large, willing to dedicate much of their lives to their students. Given this level of dedication and care, why do teachers ultimately utilize practices that reinforce unequal social relations by continuously attempting to normalize the "problem" of disability? The answer lies in teachers' belief, however accurate it may be, that students' only chance at acceptance and success is meeting expectations of normalcy. Teachers see no other choice. There are no other existing pathways for them to educate students with disabilities in a fully liberatory way that also provides for their futures.

The tension between care and control reveals a larger issue of theorists and practitioners approaching important issues in teaching from different perspectives. Whether these views are able to be fully incorporated with one another remains to be seen. They are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but using only one gives a limited understanding of the work that

special education teachers actually do. The job of special education teachers is not simple or straightforward, but the conflicts that they face in doing their work have not been paid proper attention. Instead, scholars have only explored certain angles, and thus have not sought to realize the full complexity of the process that is teaching special education. The question of how to use education as a tool of equality for students with disabilities cannot be answered purely by theory, nor can practitioners ignore it in their work. By bringing these two sides of the discipline together, teachers, researchers, and disability advocates can begin to discover and create the full power and potential of special education.

## LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by a number of factors, which impacts the possibility of generalizing its findings. One of the most glaring limitations is the setting in which this study was conducted. A classroom in a self-contained private school is a specific setting; the findings from this study could potentially be very different from a similar study conducted in a different special education setting, such as an inclusion classroom or a classroom within a public school. Inclusion classrooms would have particular confounding factors because of the presence of neurotypical similar-age peers being educated with students with disabilities, which changes teaching practices, the process of socialization within the classroom, and potentially many other aspects of teacher-student interactions within the classroom. Studies such as this one should be conducted in classrooms and with teachers in a variety of settings to uncover potential differences between or similarities across settings.

This study was also limited by my positionality as a researcher. As the sole researcher on the project, and an undergraduate student, my time and resources were limited. This is why my research was limited to only six weeks of observation, why the observations were conducted in

only one classroom and at a school's summer program, and why only five respondents were interviewed. Additionally, I was unable to include the perspectives of the students, which is a vital part of understanding the relationships between teachers and students; because of my position as a researcher, interviewing the students, who are part of a protected class, would have been nearly impossible. The lack of voices of people with disabilities – the students – is a serious detriment to this study. In short, the scope of this project was limited by my abilities and resources as a researcher. Additionally, because I worked alone, any bias introduced in the study could not be balanced by additional researchers. While I worked with an awareness of my own position in relation to the subjects of my study, there is certainly some level at which my own bias impacted the results of my findings.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the limited scope of this study, there are many directions that these initial findings can be taken for further research. Directly related to the limitations of the study, teacher-student interactions need to be further researched in other special education settings. There exists a great diversity of educational settings for individuals with disabilities, which means that in order to determine any generalizable claims, research must be conducted across these various contexts. Both observations and interviews with teachers would benefit from being conducted in diverse settings with teachers from diverse backgrounds. Factors such as a teacher's background, a school's access to resources, the impact of legal educational standards, and many others were outside the scope of this project's research, and so should be undertaken to ascertain the validity of this study. Additionally, throughout this project it was clear that staff members other than teachers play a significant role in the educational experience of students with disabilities. Further

research should be conducted on the roles that paraprofessionals, occupational therapists, counselors, and other authoritative figures may play in the education of students with disabilities.

In addition to this same research process being conducted across settings, there are other research questions that could be examined to further the research conducted in this study. The experiences of teachers dedicating a great deal of energy to developing relationships with students begs the question, what is the role of emotional labor in special education teachers' experiences? The differences between theory and practice raise concerns about what conflicts special education teachers experience, and how they negotiate these conflicts to develop a pedagogy. The teachers in this study want to provide the best education they can to their students, which ultimately raises the question at the center of all of this: what is the best way to help students with disabilities? This is a complex question that is not easy to define and will require new ways of considering and conceptualizing research on special education.

Ultimately, further research needs to take into account both practitioner concerns and a sociological perspective. If researchers are to consider what practices produce the best outcomes for special education students, they must also consider how those outcomes are defined, or what outcomes are even available for individuals with disabilities. The embedded ableism of the social world that makes special education an important resource for individuals with disabilities cannot be ignored. Teachers' practices can impact how students interact with the world, but they may also be able to impact the world that students interact with. Further research would be best served by trying to integrate questions of teaching practices in special education into a sociological model that understands how those practices are situated within a larger social world.

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